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ALL FIGHTS ARE PERSONAL

EXPERIENCE THE EPIC SHOWDOWN OF THE MISHIMA CLAN THROUGH STUNNING STORY-DRIVEN CINEMATIC BATTLES AND INTENSE DUELS THAT CAN BE ENJOYED WITH FRIENDS AND RIVALS

Love, Revenge, Pride. Each one of us has a reason to fight. Values are what define us and make us human, regardless of our strengths and weaknesses. There are no wrong motivations, just the path we choose to take. Powered by Unreal Engine 4, *TEKKEN 7* is available now on PS4, Xbox One and for the first time on PC.

UNREAL ENGINE 4

Powered by Unreal Engine 4, *TEKKEN 7* is the best looking TEKKEN game ever through near photo-realistic graphics and the addition of stunning fighting effects

SEAMLESS STORY EXPERIENCE

Over-the-top cinematic story sequences blending flawlessly into fierce battles that unveils the thrilling storyline on the Mishima family in a very innovative way.

AKUMA

Street Fighter's Akuma flawlessly transitions into the 3D space and joins the fray in an epic franchise mash-up complete with all his shoto-style moves and fireballs.

ROSTER OF OVER 30 PLAYABLE CHARACTER

A solid roster of over 30 characters including brand new fighters with one of the world's biggest move-set list in a fighting game that allows for a complete freedom of your fighting style. Find your favourite deadly techniques, martial arts moves and combos to win the fight!

ALL NEW BATTLE MECHANICS & MOVES

Classic 1vs1 battles return along with new moves and battle mechanics like "Rage Arts", "Power Crushes" and "Rage Drives" that make gameplay more accessible for players of all skill levels. Beating your friends in *TEKKEN 7* will be based on either focused training or just pure fun.

THE FINAL CHAPTER OF THE MISHIMA BLOOD SAGA

TEKKEN 7 represents the final chapter of the 20-year-long Mishima feud. Unveil the monumental ending to the emotionally charged family warfare between members of the Mishima clan as they struggle to settle old scores and battle for control of a global empire, putting the balance of the world in peril...

IN STORES NOW

>PCPP #264

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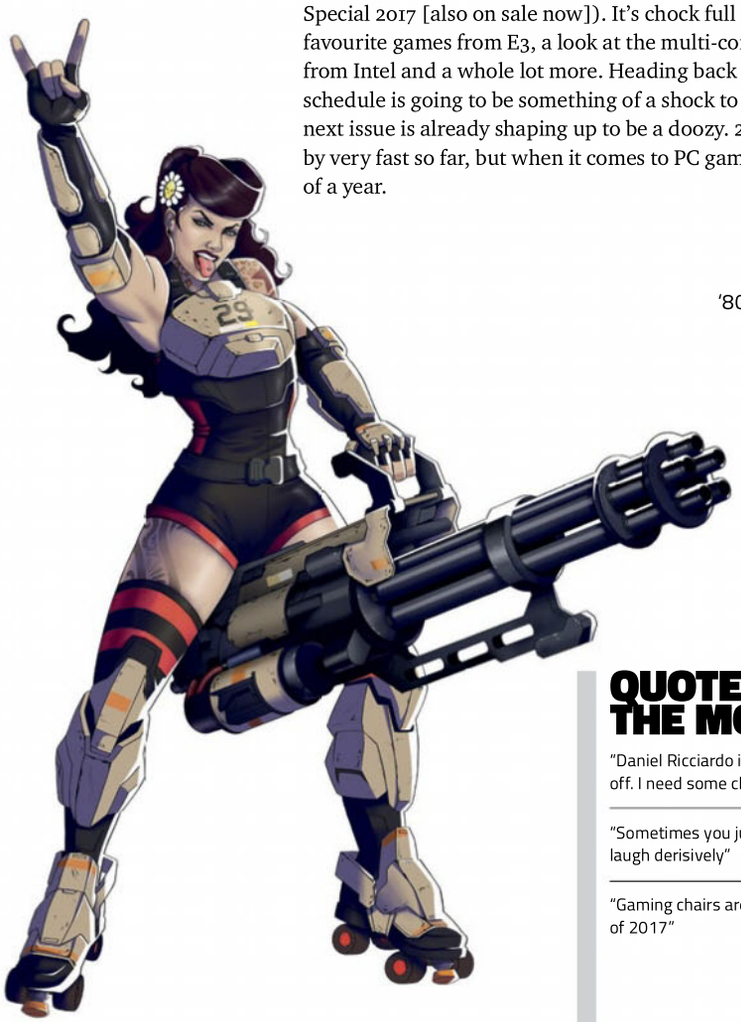
MAD MONTH

Every year, the June/July period is something of a nightmare here. Whereas many other businesses have their craziness towards the Christmas period, our craziness comes from the close temporal proximity of Computex and E3. Both shows are extremely important events as they are the key avenues for major announcements in the tech and gaming sector. There are other games shows throughout the year, with the multiple PAXes (PAXi?), GamesCom, Blizzcon and the growing presence of games at various big comic conventions, but even so, E3 is still the big one. Likewise, there are other tech shows, but none of them are as focussed on PC as Computex. Because of the importance of these events, we run specials dedicated to each, as well as our usual magazines, so what that basically means is that we have four magazines to send in a five week period rather than one every four weeks or so.

This isn't a complaint, though you may have heard some definite whinging if you were a fly on the wall in the office. Life may be sidelined for a month and a bit around this time every year, but it's worth it. No other industry moves as fast as gaming, on both the hardware and software side. Blink and you'll miss a new idea or new technology. There's always something new and interesting to discover, and writing about something so fast paced is a joy, even when it's a royal pain in the arse due to deadlines. Magazine people are a little crazy, but we like it that way.

Welcome to issue 264, the last issue in the month of madness (the others being issue 263, the PCPP Tech Special 2017 [on sale now] and the Hyper Games and Tech of the Future Special 2017 [also on sale now]). It's chock full of goodies. Our favourite games from E3, a look at the multi-core monster CPUs from Intel and a whole lot more. Heading back to our regular schedule is going to be something of a shock to the system, but next issue is already shaping up to be a doozy. 2017 has flashed by very fast so far, but when it comes to PC gaming it is a hell of a year.

Daniel Wilks
'80s music trivia wiz
@drwilkenstein



QUOTES OF THE MONTH

"Daniel Ricciardo is getting rubbed off. I need some clear nail polish."

"Sometimes you just have to laugh derisively"

"Gaming chairs are the RGB fans of 2017"

PC PowerPlay

EDITORIAL
EDITOR Daniel Wilks
dwilks@nextmedia.com.au
GROUP ART DIRECTOR Malcolm Campbell
mcampbell@nextmedia.com.au
TECH EDITOR Bennett Ring
bennettr@internode.on.net
GROUP EDITOR TECH AND GAMING
Ben Mansill
bmansill@nextmedia.com.au
SUB EDITOR David Wildgoose
INTERN We need a new one

CONTRIBUTORS
Meghann O'Neill, Terrence Jarrad, Andrew Whitehead, Theo, Julian Rizzo-Smith, Heidi Kemps, Morte, David Hollingworth and Anthony Fordham

ADVERTISING
GROUP ADVERTISING MANAGER TECH & GAMING
Cameron Ferris
cferris@nextmedia.com.au
(+612) 02 9901 6348
M: 0405 356 419

ACCOUNT MANAGER TECH & GAMING
Sean Fletcher
sfletcher@nextmedia.com.au
(+612) 02 9901 6367
M: 0402 585 124

ADVERTISING TRAFFIC
Charles Balyck
cbalyck@nextmedia.com.au

PRODUCTION & DIGITAL SERVICES Jon Bishop
CIRCULATION DIRECTOR Carole Jones

PUBLISHING
ADVERTISING DIRECTOR B2B & B2C TECHNOLOGY GROUP
Lee De La Rue Browne
ldelaruebrowne@nextmedia.com.au

SUBSCRIPTIONS
www.mymagazines.com.au
TOLL FREE **1300 361 146**
Locked Bag 3355, St Leonards NSW 1590

COVER DISC ENQUIRIES:
dwilks@nextmedia.com.au
02 9901 6100

nextmedia

Building A, Level 6 207 Pacific Highway
St Leonards, NSW 2065
Locked Bag 5555,
St Leonards, NSW 1590

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
David Gardiner
COMMERCIAL DIRECTOR
Bruce Duncan

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Inbox

Reader Matthew Schmidt, a keen archaeologist, dug this up recently.

LETTER OF THE MONTH WINS!

Write in to PCPP with your rants, considered opinions, and endless run-on sentences of pure awesome. The address is letters@pcpowerplay.com.au. Each letter read by hand! Letter of the month wins a copy of Tekken 7.

56K BAUD

Can't find the email for tech support or even The Oracle but finally getting around to checking out this cover disc! Nice work! I think as a new and upcoming magazine in the Australian market you'll go far! Also, trying to get a game of Command & Conquer happening to try out these swell tactics - but when I wave my Null Modem cable at people they run away from me...

Any word on if there is any IPX LAN parties happening? Seems like a pretty cool game!

Laters!

Matthew Schmidt

Damn dude, that's a blast from the past.

Back in the day the disk was an entirely different beast from what it is now. Hell, the industry as a whole was a totally different beast. When the magazine first started, the disk had its own staff dedicated to not only compiling the disk (something that actually required some serious skill back in the day) but to contact developers and publishers to get demos and free games either through advertising contra or other means. This was in the days before digital distribution and broadband (even the joke network we call broadband) so the CD was the only way for people to get their fix of new games and demos.

Flash forward to now and everything is digital, and what's more, it has become centralised, with only a few digital distribution networks. As a result, since the birth of Steam, the disk has changed and the staffing with it. Our full time disk editor fell by the wayside soon after Steam found its feet – it was easier for developers and publishers to distribute content via a centralised service that host the material themselves.

The launch of cable internet and ADSL also charted the course of where the disk would eventually go. As downloads became faster and limits became more generous, the need for the disk moved from "here is the latest" to "here is a curated list of games you might dig". Without parting the kimono too much, over the years there have been many conversations about potentially removing the disk from the magazine, and even a few experiments. For a few years we published two versions of the magazine – one with a disk and one with a lower coverprice and no disk, but after a while it became obvious that the vast majority of people purchased the version with the disk. About 18 months ago we phased out the disk free version of the magazine, so the disk is here to stay.

Of course, that brings with it some problems. We can no longer sell the magazine on shelves in New Zealand because of the disk. NZ law requires that every game or media disk be rated, and for that to happen it needs to be submitted to the ratings board in advance. Due to publishing schedules that simply isn't possible. We can still send the mag to subscribers, but the days of being in NZ newsagents are over.

And we'll let you know if there are any IPX LAN parties on the horizon. We could go a couple of rounds of Day of Defeat or Descent.

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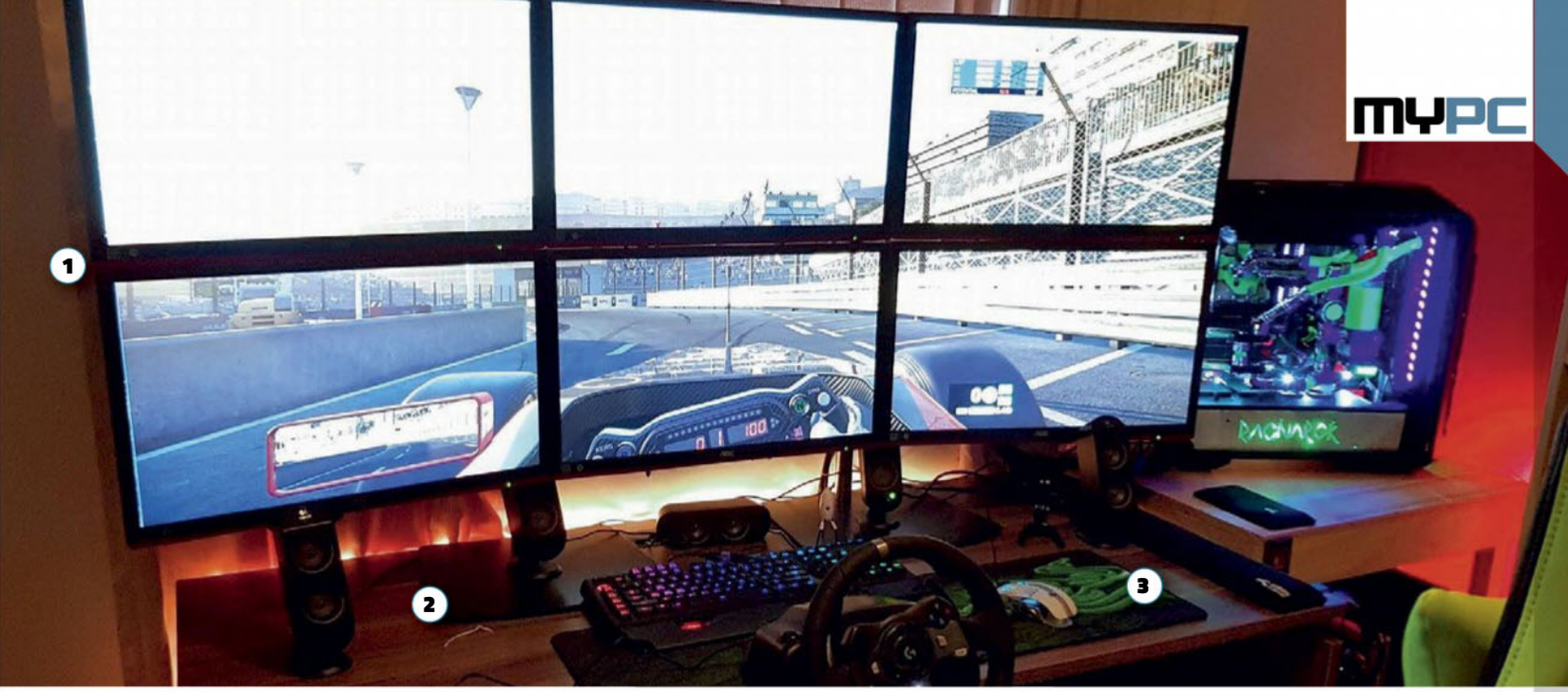

ALEX, 25, SYDNEY

This month's MY PC brought to you by Tt eSPORTS By Thermaltake

This project initially started with me building my rig out of my mum's garage when I decided to buy a starter Thermaltake water cooling but ended up expanding to a gaming room when I moved out and managed to pick up the six screens for $450. I've managed to build my own little gaming den now which is pretty cool!

MOST IMPRESSIVE ELEMENTS:

1. Crossfire RX480's
2. Custom EK / TT water cooling loop
3. Hand crafted "Ragnarok" PSU plate
4. The six screens!

WHAT MAKES MY PC SO SPECIAL?

I started building this PC after I was made redundant at my previous job. It really helped me get through a tough time so the experience I had putting her together and custom making components really helped me get back on my feet.

MY DREAM UPGRADE:

I think my dream upgrade would be a set of three ultrawide curved monitors to mimic the six screen setup I have now without the bezels.

1. We're not entirely sure you have enough screens there, dude.
2. We're seeing a lot of Logitech on that desk. Speakers, keyboard, wheel.
3. Thermaltake mouse on a Razer mousepad? Where's your brand loyalty?
4. Gaming chairs are the the most ubiquitous new bit of kit. There are 17 brands on the Australian market.
5. Pretty nice remedy for redundancy you have there.
6. With that colour scheme it's a bit more Planet Hulk than Thor Ragnarok wouldn't you say?

ALEX WINS!

Thanks to the good people at Thermaltake, Alex scores himself a sweet Tt Esports Meka Pro gaming keyboard. Enjoy!

winner!

WANT FREE STUFF? Send your MyPC entry today to *mypc@pcpowerplay.com.au*. Include the four most impressive elements of its hardware, your last upgrade, your dream upgrade, your favourite feature and what you think makes your PC special. Make sure to include your name, age and location. And last but not least, attach a 5MP or bigger image of your PC! No camera phone shots, and make sure it's in focus!

ULTRAWIDE 49-INCH, SAMSUNG C49HG90 QLED GAMING MONITOR

Samsung has announced a massive 49-inch gaming monitor using its popular quantum dot technology. The Samsung C49HG90's display features an ultra-wide 32:9 aspect ratio, 3840 x 1080 resolution, VA-type panel with an 1800R curvature, so you can see the whole damn thing while sitting at a desk. This 49-inch monitor is essentially the same as placing two 27-inch 1920 x 1080 monitors side by side and removing the bezel from the middle. It's got all the goods you expect in a gaming monitor too, like 1ms response time, 144 Hz refresh rate and importantly, AMD's upcoming FreeSync 2 tech. The C49HG90 doesn't disappoint when it comes to colour reproduction either, with 95% DCI-P3 colour gamut support. Samsung also announced smaller size monitors featuring the same specs, but smaller screens (the 31.5-inch C32HG70 and 27-inch C27HG70), but we all know you want the 49-inch big boy.

NEW HIGH-END DESKTOP PLATFORM CPUS AND CHIPSET, INCLUDING FLAGSHIP I9-7900X

Intel has updated their high-end desktop (HEDT) platform, superseding the X99 chipset with the X299 and taking the Skylake and Kaby Lake CPU micro-architectures to new levels of performance. There are three Skylake-X CPUs: i7-7800X (6C/12T, 3.5GHz/4GHz, 140W TDP), i7-7820X (8C/16T, 3.6GHz/4.3GHz, 140W TDP), i9-7900X (10C/20T, 3.3GHz/4.3GHz, 140W TDP) and four Kaby Lake-X CPUs: i7-7740X (4C/8T, 4.3GHz/4.5GHz, 112W TDP), i7-7700K (4C/8T, 4.2GHz/4.4GHz, 91W TDP), i5-7640X (4C/4T, 4.0GHz/4.2GHz, 112W TDP), i5-7600K (4C/4T, 3.8GHz/4.2GHz, 91W TDP). All the X parts use a new LGA2066 socket, with the others remaining LGA1151. There's support for up to DDR4-2666/DDRR-2400 RAM, loads of L3 cache and on the i9-7900X, a whopping 44 PCIe lanes heaps of I/O options. All CPUs are unlocked too, perfect for overclocking. Even faster (and more expensive) 12, 14, 16 and 18 core i9 CPUs that use the LGA2066 socket will be out later this year.

APPLE INTRODUCES A WORKSTATION CLASS IMAC DUBBED IMAC PRO

At their recent Worldwide Developer's Conference, Apple revealed the iMac Pro, a beefed-up iMac with workstation guts. Apple will provide options for up-to 18-core Xeon CPUs, Radeon Pro Vega GPUs, up to 128GB of ECC RAM, 4TB PCIe SSD, four Thunderbolt 3 ports, 10Gb Ethernet and an improved quality 27" 5K Retina display. To differentiate the iMac Pro from the regular iMac, it comes in a Darth Vader-esque, all black finish, including the keyboard and mouse. To get all those power hungry, heat spewing parts into the iMac's slim chassis, Apple engineered a new cooling system that they reckon dissipates 80% more heat than the existing iMac. Unusually for Apple, they've announced it months in advance. The iMac Pro isn't coming out until December 2017. It won't be cheap either, with the base model pricing starting at US$4999.

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ASUS RELEASES NO-FRILLS GRAPHICS CARDS SPECIFICALLY FOR CRYPTOCURRENCY MINING

If you've tried to buy a graphics card lately, you probably noticed that many are out of stock. Why is this? People using them to mine cryptocurrencies like Ethereum that have shot up in value. This, unsurprisingly, frustrates customers that simply want a single graphics card to place in their rig for gaming, but can't get one due to these industrial scale cryptocurrency minters. To address this, ASUS has come up with cryptocurrency specific graphics cards, the Mining RX 470 (based on AMD's RX 470 GPU) and Mining P106 (based on Nvidia's GTX1060). The RX 470 has a single DVI port, whereas the P106 has none - don't need them! Both have IP5X certified dust resistant fans and higher durability components for solid 24/7 operation at 100% utilisation. ASUS hopes cryptocurrency miners will pick these cards, leaving the traditional cards for gamers.

NEVER RECHARGE YOUR WIRELESS MOUSE AGAIN WITH THE LOGITECH POWERPLAY SYSTEM

Sick of having to recharge or swap the batteries in your wireless mouse? Logitech's new Powerplay (*Nice - Ed.*) system removes that burden from your life. The first part of the system is a 280mm x 340mm mousepad that plugs into a USB port and sends the power from that USB port to compatible Logitech mice (so far, the G903 and G703) via a proprietary magnetic resonance wireless power transfer system. The second part is a little disc Logitech calls a Powercore, which goes into the compatible mice and acts as a receiver of this wireless electricity and delivers that to the battery inside the mouse. Unlike other wireless charging systems (e.g. Qi), you don't have to keep the mouse in a single spot. As long as the mouse is on the pad, it'll charge, even whilst in use. Cool huh? The Powerplay system will be available late August.

CREATIVE SOUND BLASTERX AE-5 RELIVES THE SOUND BLASTER GLORY DAYS

Sound Blaster, the name synonymous with sweet ear tingling audio back in the 90s, has a brand new professional grade soundcard. The Creative Sound BlasterX AE-5 uses a low noise 122dB DNR, 32-bit/384kHz ESS Sabre DAC that connects to a 600-ohm discrete headphone amplifier for "audiophile grade" sound. Inside the headphone amp are German-made WIMA film/foil capacitors. The Sound Core3D DSP and BlasterX Acoustic Engine software feature Crystal Voice, improving the quality of in-game voice communications and the ability to enhance in-game audio like footsteps and gunshots. The BlasterX AE-5 also supports Scout Radar 2.0, a first-person shooter game companion that allows you to visualise and see where enemies are on your smartphone based on the audio the game produces. If you're into a bit of bling, the BlasterX AE-5 features the Aurora Reactive Lighting System compatible RGB LEDs capable of over 16 million colours and programmed to display a multitude of patterns.

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CLOUD IMPERIUM GAMES GETS LOAN

Dr. Derek Smart PhD prophecies the end of days

News has popped up that, on the surface, seems to suggest that the makers of the long-awaited await Star Citizen may be in financial trouble. News popped up on Press Start that UK-based Foundry 42, a subsidiary of Cloud Imperium Games, has taken out a loan with the bank Coutts & Co, and has leveraged as collateral a large amount of the company's intellectual property.

Basically - miss a payment, and the bank then owns the assets.

It sounds more drastic than it is, however. For one, Coutts - a financial institution that only deals with high value, reliable clients, like rock stars and even the Royal family - is not in the business of handing out loans to failing companies. It would much rather make its money from interest, than random bits of an unfinished game.

Further, the document that revealed the news, and was found by a NeoGAF poster over the weekend on the UK website Companies House (as reported by Inquisitr.com), points out that it's only Foundry 42's assets that are up as collateral - that means only assets pertaining to the standalone Squadron 42 are in question, not Star Citizen itself. Which CIG then reiterated on its own forums, going on to add:

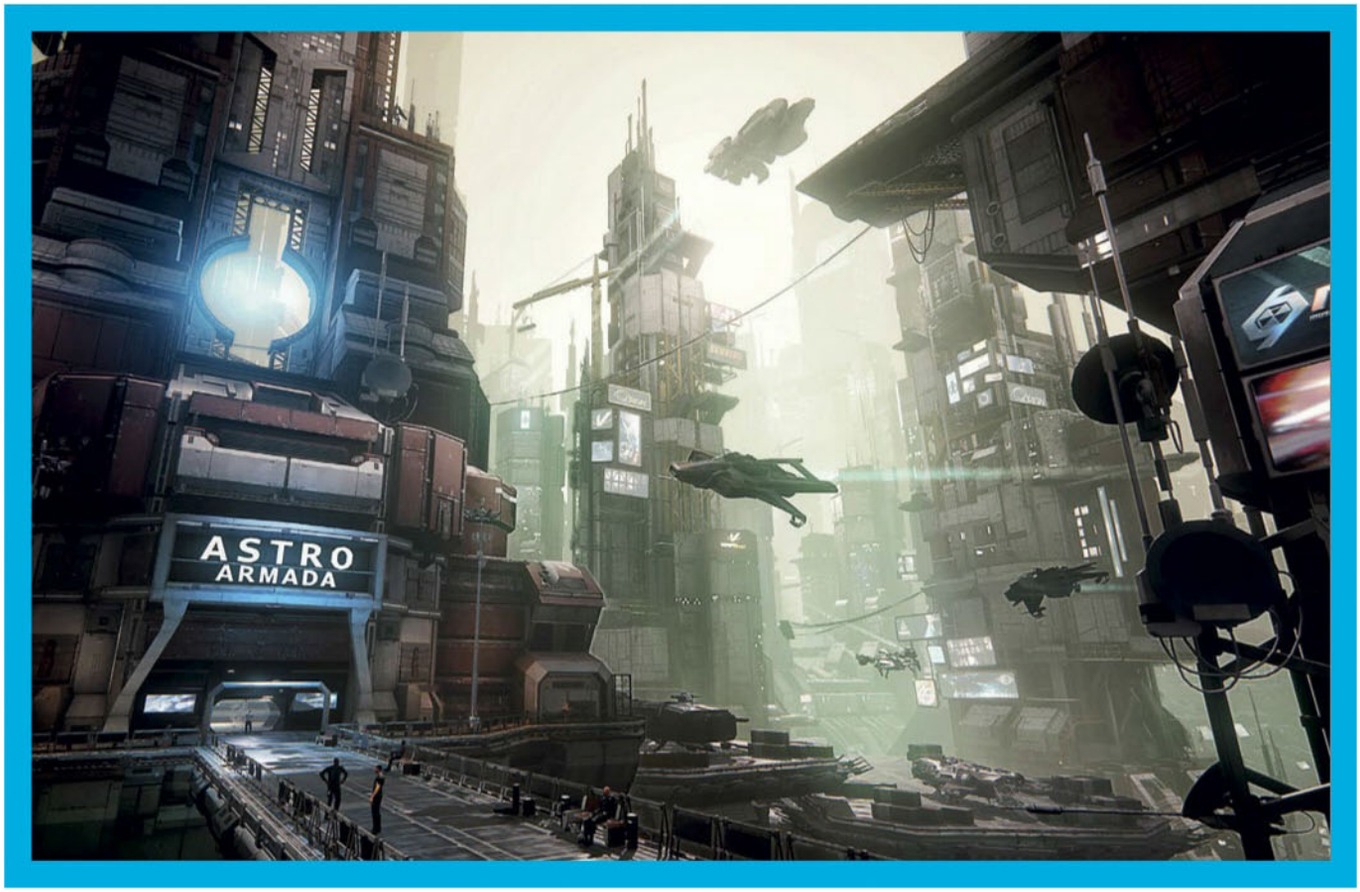
"We obviously incur a significant part of our expenditures in GBP while our collections are mostly in USD and EUR. Given today's low-interest rates versus the ongoing and uncertain currency fluctuations, this is simply a smart money management move, which we implemented upon recommendation of our financial advisors."

It's essentially a pretty standard bit of business process. But it says a lot about the complex expectations around this company and this game - and the $150 million it's already made via various forms of ship-sales and crowdfunding - that what is effectively normal practice for many other companies (such as Apple) has caused such a shockwave among both Star Citizen fans and detractors.

Derek 'Battlecruiser 3000' Smart is arguably the most vocal of the latter, and of course he was quick to light the pyres of Star Citizen's once again impending doom via his blog. But watching Star Citizen crash and burn seems to be his only career now, so maybe take it with a grain of albeit entertaining salt.

"That they took a loan against such a SMALL tax credit, should be alarming that they would even need to. If after getting $150m + investor money + loans, you also need to pledge ALL assets for a high-risk loan against a measly tax credit, that's a problem. Not to mention a tax credit that is due in just a few months when they file taxes. But they apparently need the money right now. Why is that?"

The truth is that this is such a high level of business operation that it's hard to work out either way what - if anything - the loan means. As backers ourselves... It was exciting to be a part of this game four years ago. Now, we chalk it up as a speculative investment that may one day show a return.



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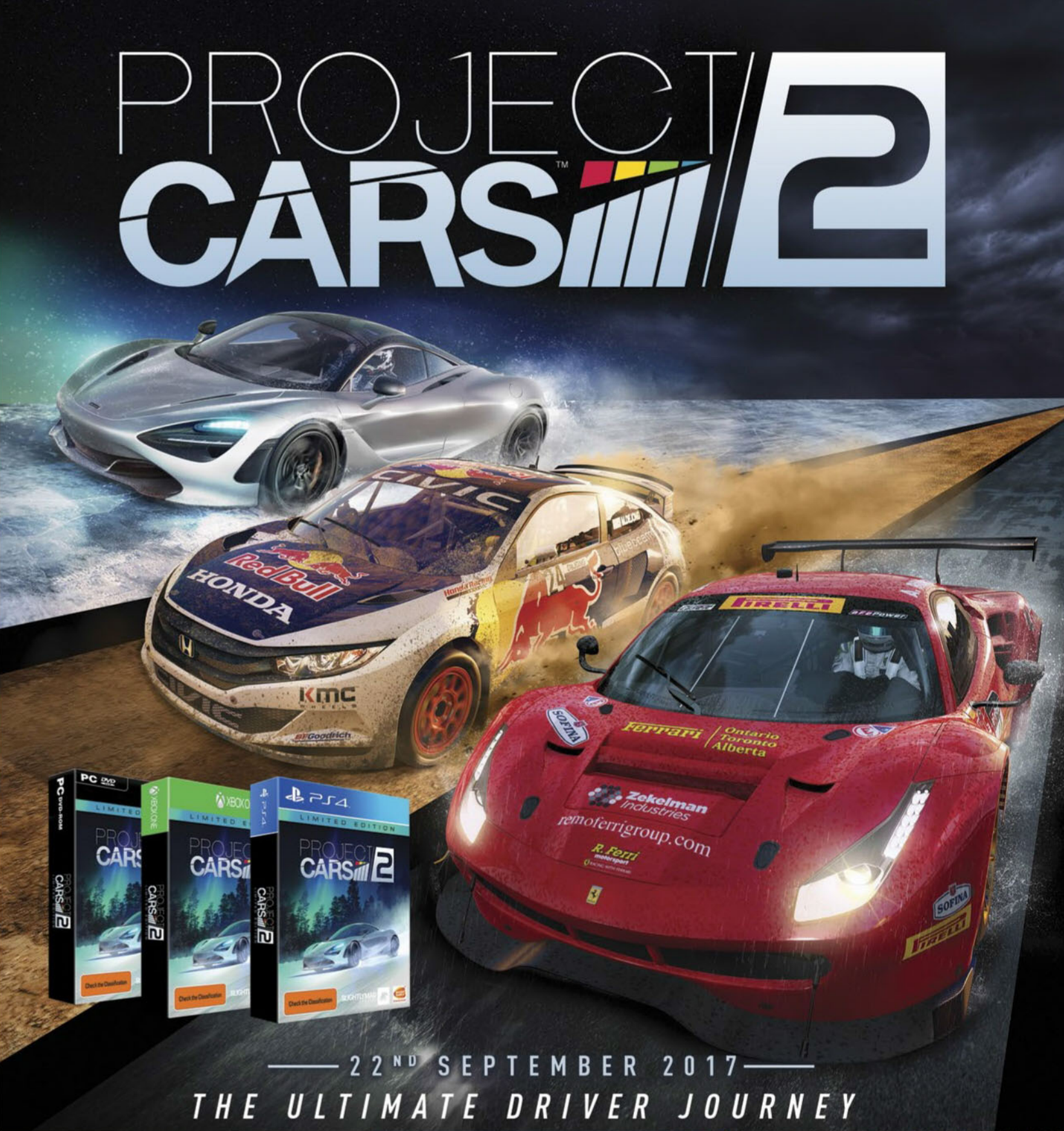

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BANDAI NAMCO Entertainment

WARGAMING'S MOHAMED FADL, AND THE 2017 WARGAMING.NET LEAGUE FINALS

We're back from Moscow and the biggest World of Tanks eSports event yet. But what does a free game get out of hosting such a big show?

esports is a big thing for Wargaming, the developers of World of Tanks, and the company continues to invest more money into its League every year. "We've been running for six years now," said Wargaming's Mohamed Fadl - the head of global esports - just before the semi-finals kicked off. "When it started, the players were on folding chairs at crappy desks. Today, it's a world brand, with millions of viewers."

And it's come a long way from those first folding chairs, too. The finals took place in the VTB Ice Palace, a sprawling Moscow complex dedicated - normally - to ice hockey. It's one of the centrepiece buildings on a massive new development encircled by two massive bends in the Moscow River. Over Saturday and Sunday, however, ice hockey fans were replaced by passionate esports fans, and the ice swapped out for a dramatic stage dominated by the two team boothes for each round.

So how has Wargaming taken it this far?

"Victor (Kislyi, the company's CEO) is player driven, so when the community came to him asking for esports, we went in that direction," said Fadl. "We want to nurture our community,and grow it. The way people digest entertainment is changing, and we need to keep up with it."

In fact, Wargaming's setting its sights very high indeed. "HBO and Amazon need to watch out, because esports is coming," Fadl added. "Average watching time is two hours for our events, so watch out Hollywood - we're coming."

The big question, though, is how a free-to-play title like World of Tanks, and Wargaming in general, profit from such massive investment in esports. Since 2013, Wargaming's invested over $US40 million into growing the brand and the community - what's in it for them?

"It's an interesting question," Fadl responds, laughing - whether at the question or just fatigue, it's hard to tell. The finals are the culmination of eight months of preparation, and Fadl's already admitted he's seen more of his work colleagues than his family for at least the last month. "We don't make money from these events; what we get back - it sounds strange - but it's the passion, the crowds, the community, the emotion... We're getting back one hundred, two hundred, even three hundred minutes of watched games, per person, and millions of viewers.

"If you look outside, it is crazy," Fadl adds - and he's right, there are thousands of people on hand to watch the game live, and in between the semis the crowd is entertained by the game's mascot - a dude in a giant lobster suit - and the sound of roaring punters and blaring music, even in the interview booth, is impossible to block out. The craziness extends to the matches themselves, too. Wargaming's constantly tweaking how its game works at this level of competitiveness, and this year the quality of matches is higher than I've ever seen before, as is each team's willingness to execute bold strategies.

"It's crazy. It costs millions to make this happen, but we do it for people here and at home. People want to see the games that they love, and the best players, so this is our chance to give something back to our players."

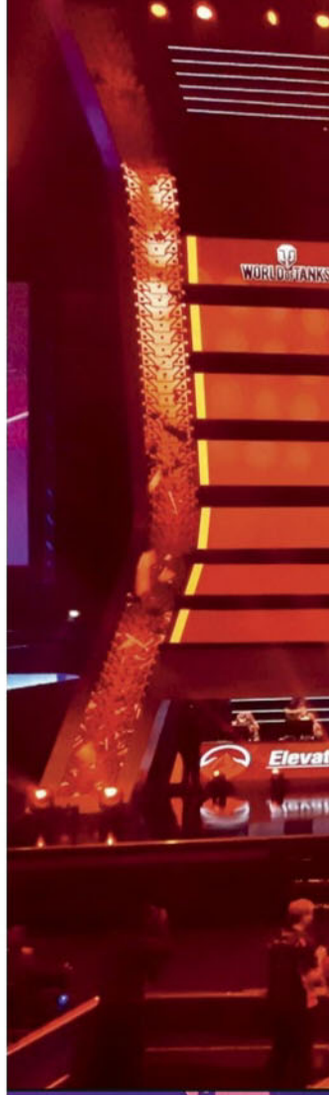
It's quite the 'gift'. The finals are made up of 12 teams from all over the world, including Australia, all competing for a $US300,000 prize pool. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Grand Final itself didn't feature any teams from outside of eastern Europe, where the game's popularity - and player base - is biggest.

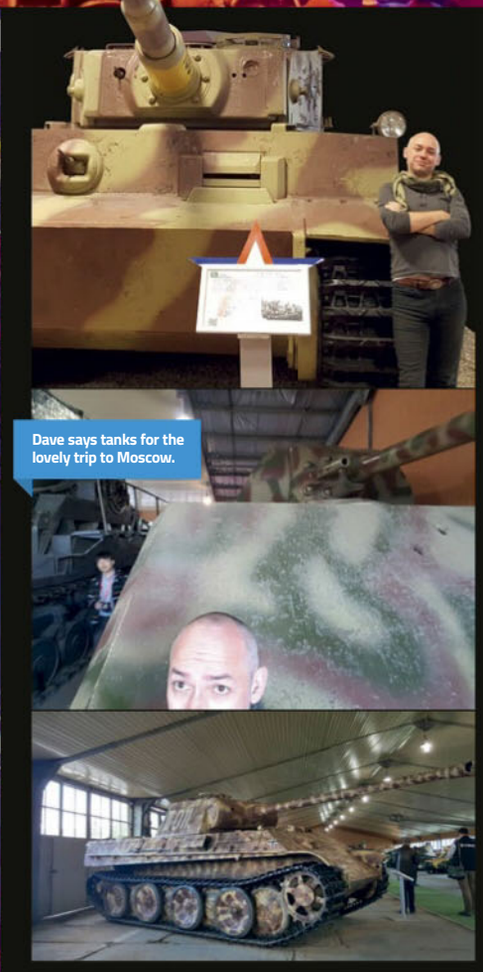
The final match, between Tornado Energy and dING, was fantastic. Tornado dominated the entire first to seven wins set of games, but each of those games was a superbly tense affair. In fact, having recently been to the IEM finals in Poland, and the first IEM event here in Sydney, I think I can say that this was possibly some of the best esports I've seen.

And with Wargaming just one player investing heavily into esports, alongside the likes of Intel, Riot Games, and even Blizzard, one thing is perfectly clear. esports is not only here to stay - it's only going to get bigger and bigger.

DAVID HOLLINGWORTH PC

The finals offered up a prize pool of $300,000. And this sweet slab of a trophy.





Dave says tanks for the lovely trip to Moscow.

THE REAL TANKS OF WORLD OF TANKS

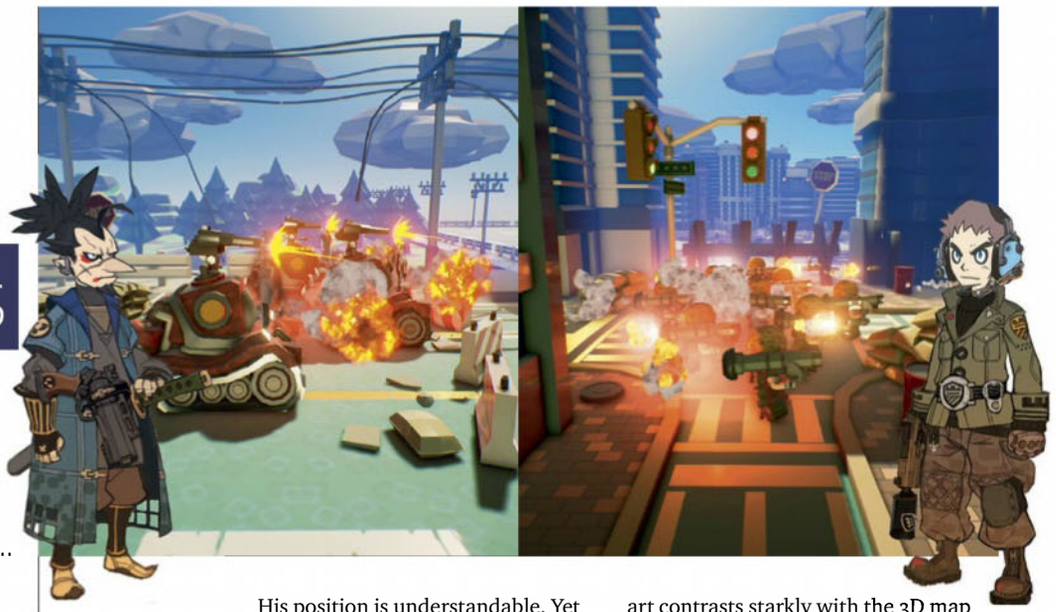
Wargaming was nice enough to send us on a lovely tour of Moscow that culminated in a trip out of town to the massive Patriot Park, a giant military museum that covers Russia's military hardware from the Great War up to the modern day. Nestled in between fields packed with MIG jet fighters and Hind helicopters, was a couple of giant hangars packed with the most complete and pristine collection of World War 2 fighting vehicles we've ever seen.

If you've never seen a tank in the flesh, it's amazing just how large these steel beasts are – especially if you've only seen the tanks in-game in WoT, as many of the journalists in our group had. As an old war nerd, though, these vehicles were like old friends – though I will admit a certain amount of LOSING MY SHIT when I get to lean against the Tiger I for a photo opp.

Seeing the only working Maus tank in existence was also pretty special – this is the largest tank produced during WW2, and it is a monster. In fact, it was one of those stupid engineering ideas that fascinated the German High Command, but was in fact way too large and difficult to manufacture to be even close to practical. But that's not stopped Wargaming from recently re-balancing the tank to make it a more attractive proposition, especially at the high end of esports – three or even four of these lumbering vehicles was a common site in nearly every match we saw.

Hardly realistic, but certainly dramatic!

Advance Wars Wars



After years of Nintendo's neglect, some of the most innovative developers on PC are striving to bring Advance Wars back to life...

The most incongruous moment of E3 unfolded at the PC Gaming Show. An event supposedly meant to showcase the most advanced video game technology on the planet spent valuable minutes promoting War Groove, a strategy game that looks like it belongs on the Game Boy Advance. Yet this demo was well received because of a stark, terrifying reality of today's video game industry: we have now gone for an entire decade without a new Advance Wars.

Intelligent Systems, the studio that makes Advance Wars, is not defunct. Far from it – their Fire Emblem series surges from strength to strength. The key to Fire Emblem's appeal lies in its 'support' system. Player-controlled knights and wizards get to know each other better if they sit in adjacent map squares while battling enemies. Increasing their support level grants combat bonuses, and triggers amusing little cutscenes. Characters can grow fond of each other, get married, and in some games their kids will time travel back from the future to become playable units. For many players the tactics take a back seat to the dating sim-cum-eugenics simulator.

Advance Wars never had this support system, and producer Hitoshi Yamagami has stated that the series will not return until they can devise a way to implement something similar: "Personally, I'd love to do Advance Wars, but since it's harder to create relationships between its characters compared to Fire Emblem, I don't have a clear idea of what kind of setting it could have." Translation: "No more Advance Wars until we can figure out how to make the tanks and the fighter jets fuck."

JAMES COTTEE knows how tanks and fighter jets fuck. But he's not telling.

His position is understandable. Yet in the past decade loyal Advance Wars fans are starting to take matters into their own hands. After a long, long drought we can now look forward to at least three different Advance Wars clones, each offering a unique and novel approach.

War Groove has been enjoying a lot of exposure, but is also the least ambitious of the three. It's being made by Chucklefish, and after the long, long years that Starbound spent in Early Access Hell one can understand why they'd want to create as straightforward a game as possible.

> "lords and ladies appear to have leaped straight from the dankest pages of tumblr"

The colour palette, the interface, and the little mini-cutscenes triggered by each skirmish are all loving homages.

Unfortunately, the character designs are quite ugly. The lords and ladies of Chucklefish's fantasy realm appear to have leaped straight from the dankest pages of tumblr. Even the game logo looks like it was made by a disinterested work experience kid in MS Paint. Fortunately, War Groove promises to be fully mod-able, so that gamers with a more refined sense of aesthetics will be able to craft something better.

In terms of actual gameplay innovation, Tiny Metal looks far more promising. Produced by an all-star team of veteran Japanese devs, its high-quality paper doll-style character art contrasts starkly with the 3D map and battle graphics rendered in Unreal Engine 4. It's a fresh look, and the combat system boasts some bold new ideas, like letting you concentrate the firepower of multiple units in a single attack. Compared to the far more derivative War Groove, Tiny Metal appears to be more of a true spiritual successor to Advance Wars.

Then there's Into The Breach, the new game from the creators of FTL. This will skew more towards puzzle-style gameplay with deterministic, cascading consequences on cramped, chessboard-sized maps.

Aside from their shared inspiration, the crucial thing these three games have in common is that their creators are trying to actually give gamers what they want.

Consider the ongoing tragedy of Battleborn, Gearbox's high-profile, high-budget online shooter. Post launch, SteamCharts.com was showing as few as 21 simultaneous players worldwide. Re-launching as a free-to-play game induced a brief flurry of interest, but within a fortnight player numbers crashed. As of this writing there are fewer people routinely playing Battleborn than Evolve, another 'AAA' title re-launched in the free-to-play space.

One would hope that Gearbox CEO Randy Pitchford has learned some lessons from all this, because within hours of Io Interactive going indie he publicly offered to publish the next Hitman game.

Killing one IP could be put down to misfortune. But to kill two, well. That would start to look like carelessness. PC

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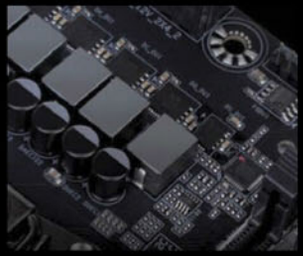

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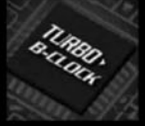

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WHAT IS BEST IN LIFE

WHO ARMAĞAN YAVUZ
WHERE TALEWORLDS ENTERTAINMENT
WHY MOUNT & BLADE II: BANNERLORD

More than a fusion of RPG, strategy, and tactics, Mount & Blade whisked players away into a world of cavalry mayhem. We talk to TaleWorlds founder **ARMAĞAN YAVUZ** about how the long-awaited sequel will let players go medieval like never before...

On the desolate steppes of PC gaming culture, the Mount & Blade series has garnered the sort of following that most devs can only dream of. Yet TaleWorlds founder Armağan Yavuzis acknowledges that in spite of its cult appeal, Warband was far from perfect. "With Warband we had great success, a much higher level of success than we had ever imagined, when we were setting out. But it was still regarded as kind of a rough gem. There were a lot of interesting ideas in the game, but most of them we didn't have the time and resources to polish very much.

"In Bannerlord, we want to do everything right. We want to create a game that is still true to the basic premise of Mount & Blade, which is letting you become an adventurer in a sandbox world. Giving you a lot of freedom, but also making sure that everything you do has effects on the game world, and is meaningful. Taking the old basic premise and making sure that everything is as polished as it could be."

To that end, the graphics engine has had a complete overhaul. "For example, we use physically-based rendering now. Which allows us to have much better fidelity. The engine is generally more optimised, so we can show bigger battles, and it performs generally better. More beautiful scenery and larger battle maps.

"But the most important thing is that we are also using a much more advanced scripting system, using C#. And that allows us to model the world in much better detail. And have game behaviours that are much more exciting, deeper." The combat AI in particular has seen a massive improvement; Armağan compared its layered approach to the structure of an onion. "At the very basic level we have individual soldier AI, which decides how to move around and when to attack and when to move back, etc. Even on that front, we have a lot of improvements. The actions your opponents are making are more fine-tuned, and they will be more challenging to fight one-on-one against.

"But I think the more interesting things maybe are about how also they cooperate together, and how they move together. We have more detailed battlefield tactics and AI, so you will see that for your enemies, as you come across more higher level armies, they move much more like you would expect from a big, big, big army. So for example, you will see that maybe they will be splitting their cavalry, and they will be doing various manoeuvres with their cavalry, and their archers will come forward to skirmish you and then pull back, so that we have a system where we can model more detailed battlefield tactics, better.

> "Back in the time of Bannerlord, the Calradian Empire is still intact – but it's going through a civil war"

"In Warband we still had basic systems, but they were quite limited. In Bannerlord there will be a much greater variety."

An army's tactics in Bannerlord will also reflect the personality of the lord commanding it. "A reckless AI lord for example will be much more inclined to just straightforward attack you. Whereas a really cautious AI lord will be much more inclined to retreat from battle when things start to go awry. So it's like you'll also get a sense of the AI's personality from the way battle progresses."

Armağan noted that the modding community that sprung up around Mount & Blade: Warband was one of the most interesting aspects of the game – and one reason why it was so long-lived and successful. For modding in Bannerlord, his team is trying out some new ideas. "First of all, since our editor is much more powerful now, and also the scripting system is also C#, those things make the modding much more fun, and much more powerful. But also one important thing we're trying to do is to make it such that different mods can co-exist. Players can install multiple mods and cherry-pick different mods together to make their ideal modding environment."

While the engine, the AI, and the modding support are all more advanced, the time period of the game world is moving backwards. Warband's fictitious setting was inspired by 13th and 14th century Eurasia, but Armağan saw he could unlock greater gameplay potential by turning back the clock.

"We decided that it would be very interesting in the new game to go backward a little bit, and have a game that models the medieval ages, around maybe the 10th or 11th century. So we decided to take away some of the higher end, or more recent armours and such, but also we started to introduce more archaic armours and weapons. And I think the choice of the time period is very interesting and makes a lot of sense. Because what we had in mind was that we were talking about this Calradian Empire that had fallen in Warband, and we decided to go back and think about what this Calradian empire could look like."

Back in the time of Bannerlord, the Calradian Empire is still intact – but it's going through a civil war. "It's surrounded by various smaller kingdoms, that are precursors of Warband's kingdoms. It has a parallel with the fall of the Roman

Empire. And so we had a lot of inspiration from Roman architecture, and Roman military technology in coming up with how the empire would look. And we have I think a very nice contrast when it is compared to the outlying kingdoms whose architecture and military technology is much more medieval looking, and much more distinct.

"There's a lot of siege technology, and battering rams. All of these can be used by the players as well as the AI. It will be possible to direct them. Or also it will be possible to just take control of them and use them against the enemy. We will try to model the military technology of the time as much as possible."

One quibble players had with the endgame in Warband was that once your empire was overwhelmingly powerful, dispatching the last of your opposition became tiresome. This concern has not gone unnoticed. "We are working in a way such that it will be, let's say, more structured in how you can defeat an enemy. What we want to achieve in Bannerlord is to make it such that there's a kind of difficulty in defeating the enemy, but once you really really overcome that, and the enemy is really defeated, the way the economy works and the way mechanics work is that once an enemy has run out of resources and power, it's much more difficult for them to put up a fight. So the grand phase of the late game is addressed by that."

The new-and-improved AI will better direct the behaviour of enemy lords at the strategic level, too. "They will be able to understand that, for example, that you are really about to take over and defeat everyone, and so you can expect a much more determined defence from your enemies. Those improvements are going to make the endgame more interesting."

There will be more varied role-playing options for the player, too. While amassing a vast army and crushing all opposition will be the default course of action, you'll also be able to win with a much smaller party. "It will certainly be possible to play as something like a merchant, for example. Without necessarily being part of the political battle, in a sense."

Mount & Blade II: Bannerlord was first announced in 2012, and in the half decade since fans have been champing at the bit. When discussing this interminable dev process, Armağan was surprisingly frank. "The game has been taking a lot of time, that's for sure. You can rest assured that we are really, really working very hard to make sure that we can finish the game as soon as possible. The one reason of course it's taking so much time is that we are still learning, and we are not perfect, and we can sometimes, maybe, make silly mistakes and so on. Another reason is that we are kind of perfectionists in our own way. We are not happy with half-baked solutions. So we sometimes have to do things over and over again until we have something that satisfies us.

"Whenever we go over a hurdle and we design something that is beautiful and works well, we feel that the time we spent on this is worth the effort. I hope that players, after the wait is over, will feel the same thing."

But just how soon will players be able to try Bannerlord for themselves? Armağan told us that there's a good chance that the game will be sold via early access, and that such a paid beta scheme could even launch this year. For more details, visit *TaleWorlds.com*.

JAMES COTTEE PC

Welcoming Ways

When a well-placed smile is good for people and good for business.

So, I was sitting on the floor, next to my nine year old son, who was standing on his head, listening to Liam Esler welcome everyone to GX, the second of two such queer-focused game conventions we'd been to. I already felt welcome, and I got the sense that everyone in the room was really happy to be there, but when Liam started specifically explaining how to meet the people around you, by saying "Hi" and asking them what they thought of the indie games on show, I started thinking, "Well, yeah. This needs to be explicitly stated more often."

We're all computer nerds here, right? And we were nerds in high school? And we know what it feels like to be excluded? I do, anyway. The deputy principal, at a high school where I used to teach, called this process, with an ominous tone of voice, "The Game." At assemblies, she'd talk about the kid who would approach the group and find that everyone was suddenly turned slightly away. Or, he who was participating in a discussion, but was being questioned rigorously, as if he had to jump through hoops just to be allowed to talk.

I don't know what impact her dark speeches had, really. It's possible that some of the kids who were doing the excluding needed for it to be pointed out. Her approach was very much to not look past someone's behaviour and to see it for what it was. At the time, I was just impressed by how encouraging my music students were towards each other. It's difficult to stand in front of a group and sing, everyone understands that, and so they'd genuinely cheer on literally everyone. Skill was appreciated, but bravery more so.

I've never understood why "games" doesn't also feel more innately like a special group of likeminded people. We share a pursuit that is clever, creative and social. Liam's words, of course, reminded me that there is something to be done to improve things. Moving mountains to make events like GX happen, but also just remembering to smile. I want to know what people are playing and making. I also want people to feel welcome to chat with me. They're mutually supportive goals.

As I was wandering around the indie games on show at GX, I decided to take off my game reviewer hat and put on my Cap of Friendliness +1, instead. I'm good at showing enthusiasm for people's weird indie projects, but I found myself asking people how they were feeling and how their day was going, too. Interestingly, it encouraged better, more open conversation, and designers seem to divulge more about their games than the regular public relations pitch I'm used to.

> "If we want to become more inclusive, we have to be active in our welcome"

Similarly, when my son wanted to have a go on a Switch, I fought my urge to "play all the PC indies right now" and decided to stop and punch him in the face for 20 minutes; in ARMS, that is. (And don't worry, he punched me plenty enough, too.) Really, it was all a lovely experience in which I de-prioritised my usual approach to work, had an uncharacteristic amount of laughs with developers, players and my son, and came to better appreciate how enriching relationships supports my work anyway.

I contacted Liam, who is GX's co-founder, to ask why he specifically invited people to actively engage with each other. He says, "It's something that's often easy to forget to do, but also crucially important. If, as an industry, we want to become more inclusive and diverse, we have to be active in our welcome. We have to make it clear to people that they are welcome and valued, because these things aren't assumed. It's the difference between knowing a party is happening, and being invited to the party."

Again with the high school awkwardness, but I certainly remember being invited to parties I wasn't really welcome at, where I'd be greeted at the door by smirking people who obviously didn't like me. On other occasions, people invited me over and had hired movies I liked. There's a difference. I asked Liam about how they'd structured the convention, for inclusiveness. He says, "This meant tabletop RPGs, well-curated panels, a carefully selected list of guests." Indeed, there was room to move, shared spaces and niche panels on queer content.

So, in the spirit of using my work to better support and network with people, within areas I'm already interested in, I collected inspiring words and made a website called Tiny Advice for Game Developers. Everyone is welcome to give and receive words there. So, what can you contribute? Even a smile next time you're in a gaming space might make a difference, to both someone else and to you. PC

MEGHANN O'NEILL would like you to know she is smiling at this page as she is writing it.

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A Collection Aside

Each of this month's games messes with reality, in one way or the other, and **MEGHANN O'NEILL** has become wary of falling asleep. She's also been trying to find shortcuts on her daily walks, by clawing at the steeper hills, to no avail. And she's been buying garishly coloured donuts, but just from the regular bakery, not the one run by cute little creatures with tails. So, join us on a journey to unlikely and amazing places, via impossible routes and through the fabric of this existence...

RAKUEN

DEVELOPER LAURA SHIGIHARA
PRICE $15
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RELEASED

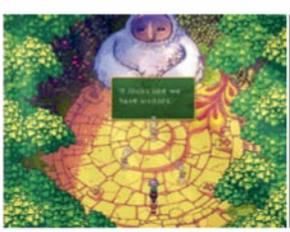
What kind of game would you expect the Plants vs Zombies composer to make? A game with great music, right? I've been listening to Rakuen's soundtrack for a year already. So, it was pretty special when I solved an early mystery and was rewarded by my favourite track (Fish Heads) being the character theme for the person I'd found. I'd previously had no context for that piece, I'd just really liked it, texturally and harmonically. Every moment of music, familiar or otherwise, lends great depth to both this amazing world and its wonderful people.

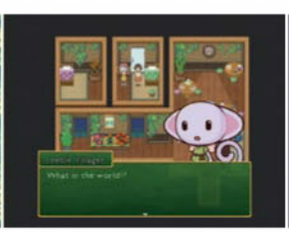
Beyond being great, the music actually isn't the point of the game. You begin as a boy in hospital, not well enough to leave, but allowed to explore the corridors. A nurse mentions recent reports of theft and tasks you with investigation, so you take this role quite seriously, by questioning people and sneaking into places you probably shouldn't be. As with any good RPG presented in this GameMaker/visual novel style, I immediately got a crush on several cutely written characters, especially the nurse who is incredibly passionate about taking blood.

The first complication is that the thief has stolen Rakuen, the book your mum reads to you. I don't want to spoil too much content, but magical places to explore soon open up, beyond the confines of the hospital setting. The structure reminds me of how the story moves sequentially between parallel worlds in Dreamfall, by Red Thread Games. You're seeking something important and, in doing so, learn a lot about the people and creatures inhabiting these places, and what has happened here.

Most amazingly, you sometimes get to adventure with your mum. She largely functions as an in-game hint system, but it's a lovely experience, mostly because she's kind and she doesn't take even the most terrifying moments too seriously. Although this may not initially seem like a difficult game, some of the puzzles require a lot of thought. Many play out in one room, but others require traversing larger spaces, speed and understanding how to use objects/codes. You will be provided with helpful maps and instruction, however.

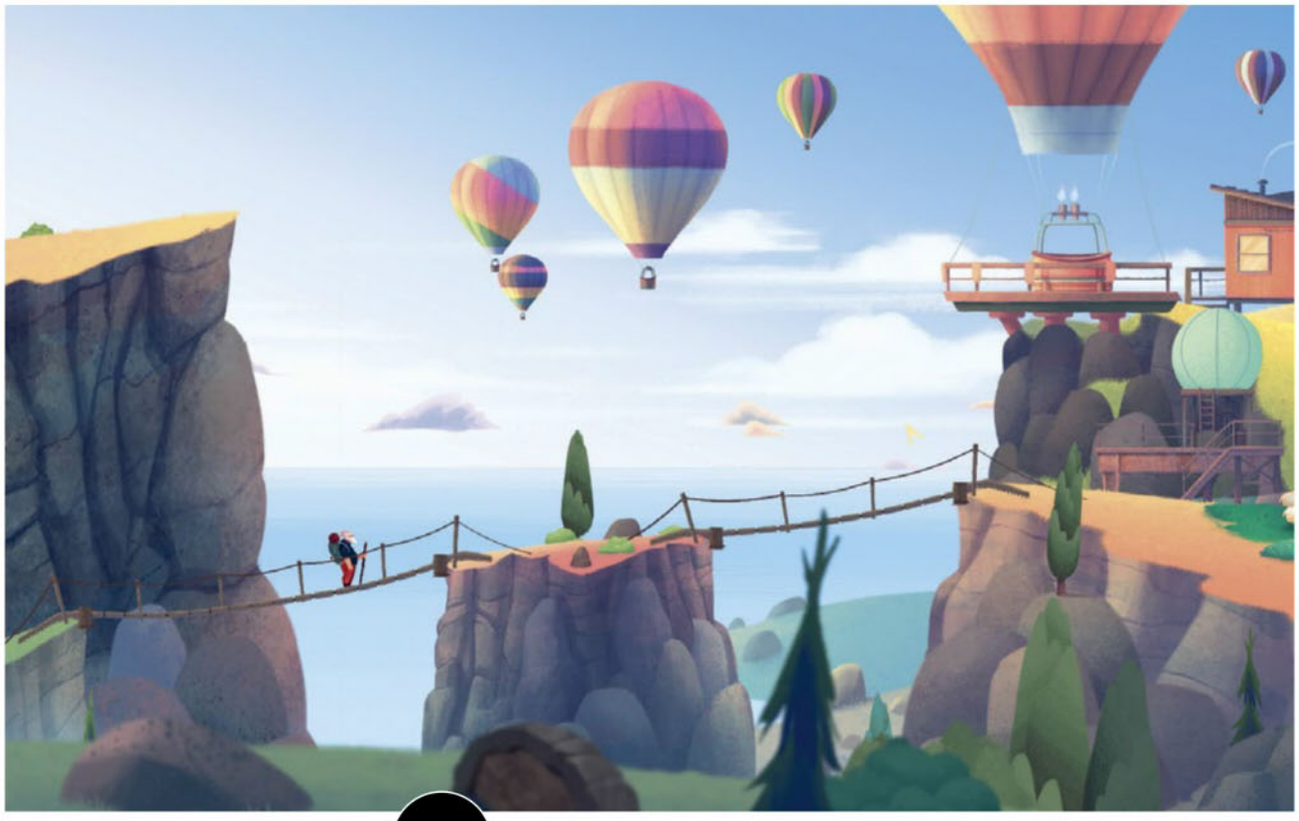
> "every moment of music lends great depth to this amazing world and its people"





In a way that's similar to To the Moon, new levels are introduced to support the narrative. There are a few hubs you'll return to and, sometimes, you'll be swept into someone's flashback, or a side story. Narrative progression never feels illogical, however, and you'll find yourself always returning to the sick girl when you find marbles, for example. She believes they're little worlds and elaborates about them endearingly. Rakuen is a surprisingly long game and certainly value for money. I never stopped wanting to know what was going to happen next.

Rakuen has a few idiosyncratic moments, like when I couldn't progress because I hadn't thought to try using someone else's bathroom, but it excels at being what it is; cute, engaging, clever and deep, set in a recognisable, but also quite unique, style. I would recommend having a listen to the soundtrack if you're on the fence. Hearing the game's world gives a sense of how much depth of character is to be found within. As for me, I now have the groovy, blues-modal village theme permanently stuck in my head. Not complaining.



RELEASED

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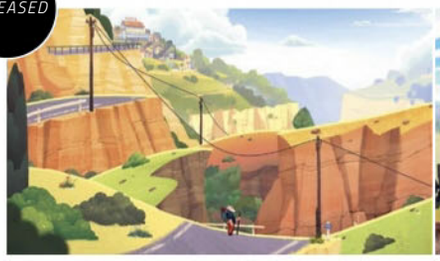


Old Man's Journey is the kind of game that is just beautiful to look at, inspiring your reviewer here to take a million screenshots. Amazingly, I had to be careful that the images you see aren't puzzle solutions. Why? This is a game you solve by manipulating the landscape to progress. The player clicks and drags the contour of hills until they form a path that the old man can traverse to a new location. I can't think of anything to compare it to. Both its visual style and gameplay feel very unique to me.

The old man in the story is hanging about his seaside home when a letter arrives. Without hesitation, he goes inside, packs a bag and gets his walking stick. And so, you begin guiding him towards some unknown destination. It's a long journey, broken by frequent sitting down. Periodic benches signify the end of levels and provide the man with quiet moments to remember important events from his past. Initially, it's unclear what the story is about, but you soon get a sense for what has happened, and can guess where he is going.

There is no dialogue, although the people and animals encountered by the old man do often react to his presence. It's the kind of game where touching everything makes doors open and close, or plants sway in the breeze, but you can't actually walk into houses or use objects. The memories are simply set as, mostly static, images. But they're packed full of information, if you look closely. This story is very small, in some ways, even when the setting is at its most grandiose. The old man even hops into a hot air balloon at one point.

When you're dragging contours to make a path for the old man, you sometimes get the sense he's lost his way and you're helping him to find it again. Other times, he seems to be waiting patiently for you to figure out something he already knows. The rules are simple. You can't move the piece of terrain he is standing on and structures, like rock walls or dwellings, generally aren't malleable. Hills however, can be stretched and shaped so that yellow guidelines make contact points and he can then agilely hop from one hill to the other.

Occasionally, the old man meets environmental complications. Herds of sheep need to be thoughtfully moved to non-obstructive places and heavy wheels can be made to roll down hills, breaking rock walls. He sometimes travels by boat and, once, by train where you have to scramble to move rails into position. The only fail state is that the train stops, but it's an effective deterrent. My kids particularly liked when the old man was on the back of a ute and the road puzzle took us back and forth over a bridge a few times. "We're so lost!" They shrieked.

Indeed, I ended up playing this with my kids, over three cold nights, on a laptop in bed. It's a snuggly kind of game. And my kids rarely snuggle, they're usually too busy kicking and squirming. We all wanted to see what would happen next, the man's simple memories being more than enough reward for short periods of hill wrangling. This is a story about familiarity and distance, as well as the decisions people will make over the course of a lifetime. It also gave me a bad case of wanderlust, or at least the impulse to plan a bushwalk at the weekend.

THE EDGELANDS

DEVELOPER MARSHLIGHT SOFTWARE
PRICE $15
www.marshlight.com

RELEASED

Yes, I will totally play a game which describes a bathtub as "yawning" and "crouching", especially in a supernatural/horror setting where it seems any creature, or suspicious object, could suddenly devour me. The Edgelands is beautifully written and immediately reminiscent of games like Fallen London and Sunless Sea. I later remembered that this is a Fundbetter game; one that Failbetter Games has invested money in. If nothing else, this recommends the strength of the storytelling much better than me blithely repeating its many evocative adjectives.

If the art weren't so lovely, I'd say this actually feels more like a text adventure than a graphic adventure. Sure, the player's direction is pre-filled, so that you don't type "look", you select it from a few choices styled to look like a command line interface, but the action largely flows between passages of text, rather than from physical exploration. Actually, probably my one criticism of the game is that the character's movement is very slow, so you're forced into a lengthy wait for basic progression, with your finger resting on W, A, S or D.

Of course, this enforced slowness may be part of the designer's intent. It'd be a weird game to speedrun. Certainly, I've never been as enchanted by a cat licking itself, or a plastic bag rolling past like dystopian tumbleweed, as while trying to cross a screen, left to right. There is time to note graffiti and trash fires, as well as high class people dining next to a polluted river by the light of their phones. But, again, this feels perhaps more like the ambient detail you'd imagine alongside your text, rather than the game itself.

As with Rakuen, solving puzzles relies on simply having objects in your possession as you approach the place they are used. This means that touching things in the right order often becomes how to progress, rather than through thoughtfulness. Some choices, like between whether to use a key on a door or to walk away, don't even seem worth making. Others, like whether to drown or save a spider, feel important even if there is no immediate, obvious consequence. As the game opens out into larger locations, puzzling gets more complex.

> "if the art weren't so lovely, I'd say this actually feels more like a text adventure"

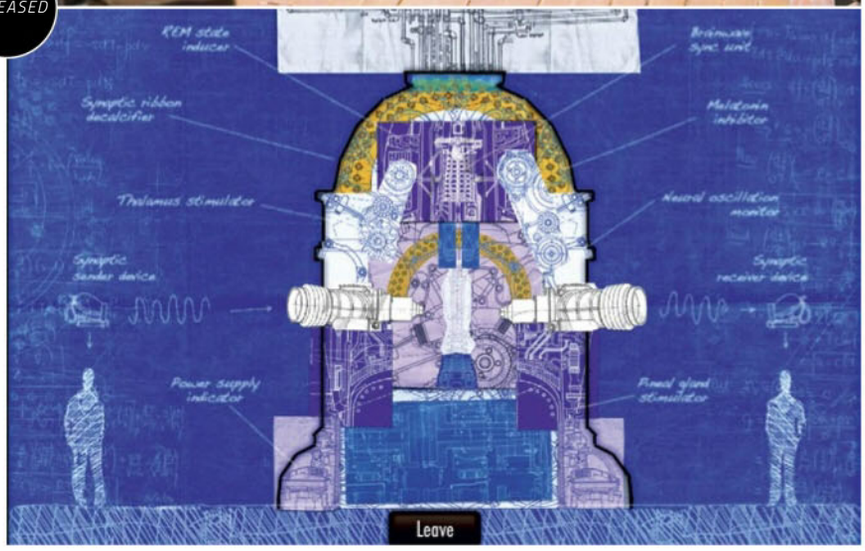
The more I read, the more I want to understand this place. Somehow, both industry and nature are powerful, and your way can be blocked as easily by a barbed wire fence or the barbed tendrils of a plant. Similarly, the music combines electronic sounds, chiptune references and detuned, metal, collision instruments, suggesting both the breakdown of a technological society as well as some other, ancient force. One of the most telling things, to my mind, is how aloofly the protagonist travels through quite dark and unusual places.

The Edgelands is a compelling and beautifully written near-text-adventure that explores how additional aspects of its presentation can function. At least, that's what it was to me. It was also clearly structured as narrative vignettes in an unusual place, but I wouldn't say I entirely understood the story. It didn't really matter. I wouldn't recommend the game to everyone, but if you have time and the inclination to read words, it's for you. It's the kind of game where the difference between a ritual and an obscure shopping list may not be immediately obvious.

THE DREAM MACHINE BUNDLE

DEVELOPER COCKROACH INC
PRICE $15
www.thedreammachine.se

RELEASED



My experience of reviewing The Dream Machine was perfectly augmented by a verbally abusive walkthrough I found on Steam. The writer of the guide called me "a 'fluffing' idiot" at one point and yelled at me, "IT'S A PUZZLE GAME," at another. Yet, I kept coming back for more hints. Why? This is a very difficult adventure game. The guide writer seemed perfectly sincere with their insults, which I found hilarious. The only thing more funny was that I got so stuck, so often, that I kept using the guide. And, I desperately wanted to see what happened next.

How did I get myself into this ridiculous predicament? Believe it or not, this game was not on my radar at all. Their PR found me in time for the release of a sixth, and final, episode. It wasn't until I was on a cruise ship, in my pregnant wife's dream, with none of the (at least) eighty-three other mes letting me speak to her until I'd investigated whether one of the mes made another me "disappear," that I realised I was absolutely hooked. I do apologise for that last sentence. It does make sense. Maybe you'd like to read it again.

The Dream Machine's creators aren't afraid to explore horror to its outer limits. Whether it's a million dead selfs, the creepy janitor spying on my bedroom, or moments that get so much worse, you should steel yourself for significant squeamishness. At the outset, you move into a new apartment with your wife, boxes of baby clothes coming with you, and it quickly becomes clear that something is very wrong with this place. The presentation, with characters and sets made from clay, doesn't detract from how gory things can get.

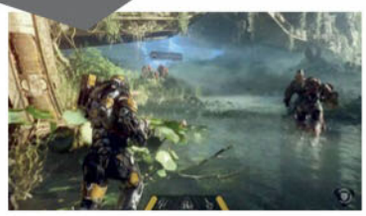
I remember exploring Claymation techniques with an art class, when I was teaching high school. It took those kids a year just to film a guy walking across the room. The attention to detail, and commitment to making every set in The Dream Machine absolutely perfect, is mind boggling. This also sometimes makes pixel hunting tricky. So, you need to look at every bottle, not just the group of bottles, as some are irrelevant. And, the music is very sparse, but clever use of harmonic overtones lends many of the settings a sense of inordinate space.

Every level is meticulously created for the sole purpose of setting a truly outlandish story, much of which plays out in surreal dreamscapes. The opening unfolds feverishly through puzzles, even without a clear goal in mind. And, the dialogue is simple, but very effective. You will banter with your wife, repress what you really want to say and confront questionable evils. One moment that moved me was in saying goodbye to a dying man. I'd previously not felt anything but disgust for the guy, but then things got complicated.

The Dream Machine is a game I couldn't stop playing. With all six levels now released, beware of the "boss puzzles" if you're playing it as one game. I didn't play this incrementally, but it would be fun to do so, because each episode is structured to provide cumulative challenge, cliff hangers and such. Perhaps releasing relatively short episodes prompted the designers to make the puzzles incredibly difficult. This is not to say they are too difficult, just that they require time and attention to process. And if you use a hint guide, apparently, you're a fluffing idiot. PC

21 to Watch

E3 SPECIAL



Anthem

1

DEVELOPER BIOWARE
PUBLISHER EA
DUE LATE 2018
www.ea.com/games/anthem

You could cynically look at Anthem as the Xbox/PC version of Destiny, but the new IP from BioWare seems to be going in a different direction to the Activision juggernaut. Players take the role of a "Freelancer" - a power armour wearing mercenary hero exploring the world, fighting monsters and experiencing world altering "shaper storms". Each player has access to the three different categories of power armour, all of which can be customised extensively, and can set out solo or in a group of up to four other players.

A Way Out

2

DEVELOPER HAZELIGHT STUDIOS
PUBLISHER EA
DUE 2018
www.ea.com/games/a-way-out

A fascinating sounding co-op only game, A Way Out charges two prisoners, Leo and Vincent, to work together to escape the prison and then evade the authorities. The game is specifically designed to be played split-screen, either locally or online, so both players can see what is happening with the other, making it easier to coordinate moves or work timing. Think Prison Break: The Game, *sans* tattooed memory superpowers and paedophile sidekicks.

3

Beyond Good and Evil 2

DEVELOPER UBISOFT MONTPELLIER
PUBLISHER UBISOFT
DUE SERIOUSLY?
www.ubisoft.com/en-us/game/beyond-good-and-evil-2

After first being announced a decade ago and then teased first with a trailer showing Jade and Pey'j from the original game, and then again with a leaked trailer of Jade running through a crowd, BG&E 2 has a third trailer, this time showing the game to be a spacefaring prequel to the original game, featuring a mouthy ape and a woman with an afro. No release date has been given, so check back here in another ten years for an update with all the latest information and a new trailer.

4

Code Vein

DEVELOPER BANDAI NAMCO STUDIOS
PUBLISHER BANDAI NAMCO ENTERTAINMENT
DUE 2018
www.bandainamcoent.com/games/code-vein

Cutely referred to as "anime Dark Souls", Code Vein is a third-person action RPG in which players take the role of a Vein, a human in a post-apocalyptic world trading memories for power so they can combat those that have succumbed to their bloodlust and have become soulless monsters. Although everything in the game seems to revolve around blood and the drinking thereof, don't call the monsters vampires. They're some other type of undead blood drinking monster.

5

Assassin's Creed Origins

DEVELOPER UBISOFT MONTREAL
PUBLISHER UBISOFT
DUE OCTOBER 27
www.ubisoft.com/en-gb/game/assassins-creed-origins

We're suffering from more than a little Assassin's Creed fatigue, but hang us if Origins doesn't make us excited thanks to the open world RPG approach the dev team is taking this time. The game will still feature linear assassination missions, but the open world will feature side missions and many areas to explore. In addition, naval combat will be making a welcome return (though it may be significantly different thanks to the much earlier time period the game is set in), as are tomb raids.

Dragon Ball FighterZ

6

DEVELOPER ARC SYSTEM WORKS
PUBLISHER BANDAI NAMCO ENTERTAINMENT
DUE 2018
www.bandainamcoent.com/games/dragon-ball-fighterz

▼ A Dragon Ball fighting game made by the team at Arc System Works (the legendary developer of the Guilty Gear, BlazBlue and Double Dragon series) combining elements from Guilty Gear and Arcana Heart as well as Marvel Vs. Capcom to deliver a game that is accessible to new players, as over the top as the source material but still deep enough to be a serious competitive game on the tournament circuit. All that and it looks pretty great too.

Crackdown 3

DEVELOPER SUMO DIGITAL
PUBLISHER MICROSOFT STUDIOS
DUE NOVEMBER 7
www.crackdown.com

▲ If you've never played a Crackdown game you've missed out. They are some of the most ridiculous, over the top and enjoyable sandbox games out there. Take the role of a super-powered Agent and fight crime with big guns, super jumps, super strength and all the super shenanigans you can come up with in a destructible open world. Crackdown 3 isn't changing the successful formula too much, with one significant caveat. In multiplayer modes, the game will feature destruction courtesy of Microsoft Azure, so everything can go boom.

7

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www.aorus.com

Metro Exodus

8

DEVELOPER 4A GAMES
PUBLISHER DEEP SILVER
DUE 2018
www.metrothegame.com/en-gb

Some of the shine was taken off Metro Exodus when a developer described it as being less an open world game and more a "survival sandbox" (two words that have been joined so often in the past few years it's ludicrous), but there is still a lot to get excited about. Exodus takes the action of the Metro series outside the ruined cities and train stations of the first two games and introduces players to a beautiful, though no less deadly countryside. The story will chart a year in hero Artyom's life as he travels with and on the locomotive Aurora looking for a better life.

Life is Strange: Before the Storm

9

DEVELOPER DECK NINE GAMES
PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX
DUE 31 AUGUST (EPISODE 1)
www.lifeisstrange.com

The change of developer from Dontnod to Deck Nine is a bit of a worry considering what a sterling job Dontnod did with the original game, but we're still very much looking forward to this prequel. Set three years prior to the original game, Before the Storm will tell the story of Chloe Price, her friendship with Rachel Amber and the fallout from discovering a dark family secret. Time travel will not play a part in Before the Storm.

10

Griftlands

DEVELOPER KLEI ENTERTAINMENT
PUBLISHER KLEI ENTERTAINMENT
DUE 2018
www.klei.com/games/griftlands

From the developer responsible for such great games as Mark of the Ninja and Don't Starve comes Griftlands, a turn-based sci-fi RPG in which everything is negotiable. We haven't had any hands on as yet but the animated style looks extremely attractive, and the idea of being able to negotiate anything ranging from money through to morality is extremely intriguing. Klei has a very strong track record, so we have high hopes for this one.

Mount & Blade II: Bannerlord

DEVELOPER TALEWORLDS ENTERTAINMENT
PUBLISHER TALEWORLDS ENTERTAINMENT
DUE TBA
www.taleworlds.com/en/Games/Bannerlord

11

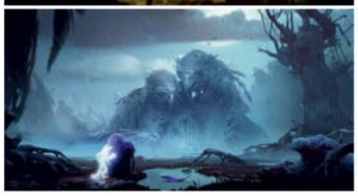
▼ Set 200 years before Mount & Blade: Warband, Bannerlord is a realistic feudal action roleplaying game set in a time analogous to the fall of the Roman Empire. The game will feature at least eight major factions with their own goals as well as a large number of smaller groups that will also have an effect on the game world. From what we understand, in keeping with previous Mount & Blade games, Bannerlord won't have a story as such but instead present the players with a breathing world they can influence through their actions.

Middle-Earth: Shadow of War

12

DEVELOPER MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS
PUBLISHER WARNER BROS. INTERACTIVE
DUE 10 OCTOBER
www.shadowofwar.com

▲ Tailon and Celebrimbor return in this sequel to the fantastic Shadow of Mordor, but this time around the Ranger of Gondor and his ghostly companion/symbiont have a new suite of tools to play with, including the ability to teleport enemies to your location for stealth kills. The Nemesis system is also expanded across the games, so not only will enemies remember what you have done, so will followers, and their actions will change depending on how you act.



Ori and the Will of the Wisps

DEVELOPER MOON STUDIOS
PUBLISHER MICROSOFT STUDIOS
DUE TBA
www.orithegame.com

13

▼ One of the most beautiful, not to mention enjoyable, games in recent years is getting a sequel. We don't have too many details about the game as yet, but from the trailer it does look as though it will keep the same beautiful and sad tone of Ori and the Blind Forest, and will once again see Ori, the young orphan hero defying the odds and exploring the world Metroidvania style. We can't wait.

Ooblets

DEVELOPER GLUMBERLAND
PUBLISHER DOUBLE FINE PRODUCTIONS
DUE 2018
ooblets.com

▲ If you're a PC only gamer you probably won't have had the pleasure of discovering NIntendo properties Harvest Moon, Animal Crossing and Pokemon. Ooblets is an indie being published by Double Fine and combines elements from each of the franchises. Players start on a rundown farm they need to cultivate, improve and manage, but that's not all. Players can also catch, train and battle wild Ooblets, plant new Ooblet seeds to sprout new little monsters, make friends with townsfolk, upgrade your house and furnishing and a whole lot more.

14

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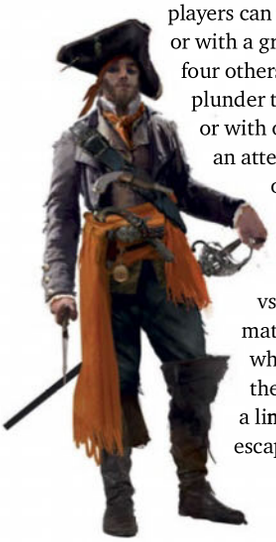
Skull & Bones

15

DEVELOPER UBISOFT
PUBLISHER UBISOFT
DUE 2018
www.ubisoft.com/en-us/game/skull-and-bones



The best part of Assassin's Creed: Black Flag becomes its own game with Skull & Bones, a wonderful looking pirate adventure that players can tackle solo or with a group of up to four others. Players can plunder trade routes solo or with other players in an attempt to become one of the most feared pirates on the sea, or take part in five vs. five multiplayer matches to see who can accrue the most loot in a limited time and escape intact.

State of Decay 2

16

DEVELOPER UNDEAD LABS
PUBLISHER MICROSOFT STUDIOS
DUE 2018
www.stateofdecay.com

The sequel to the smash hit 2013 zombie survival sandbox State of Decay brings a lot of new ideas to the table to refresh what is becoming a quite packed marketplace, but none of these ideas are as significant as the addition of co-op multiplayer. This time around up to four survivors can work together to find shelter, scavenge for supplies, fortify locations and take on the staggering number of zombies that populate the open world.

Tacoma

17

DEVELOPER FULLBRIGHT
PUBLISHER FULLBRIGHT
DUE 3 AUGUST
tacoma.game

Much like Fullbright's previous game, Gone Home, Tacoma is intriguingly obtuse. Players take the role of a lone investigator looking to retrieve information from the Tacoma station after it has been evacuated following a disaster. AR systems in the station have recorded every aspect and interaction of the six member crew, presenting them to the player as colourful silhouettes. What exactly was the disaster on the station? What happened to the crew? We can't wait to find out.

Tunic

DEVELOPER ANDREW SHOULDICE
PUBLISHER FINJI
DUE 2018
www.tunicgame.com

18

▼ A beautiful looking Zelda style isometric action game starring a fox with a sword may sound a little twee, but everything we've seen and heard of the game makes Tunic one of the most exciting indie games coming in 2018. Solo developed by a mad Canadian, Tunic looks to be all about exploration and fast paced combat, kind of like an 3D isometric version of Hyper Light Drifter. No hint of a story as yet, just that "you wander the countryside, you fight monsters, you find secrets."

Transference

DEVELOPER SPECTREVISION, UBISOFT MONTREAL
PUBLISHER UBISOFT
DUE 2018
www.ubisoft.com/en-us/game/transference

▲ Actor Elijah Wood, best known for playing Frodo Baggins, is obsessed with horror. In addition to opening his own horror specific production company, he has now set up a VR development studio with an eye to scares. The first game from the studio will see players losing themselves in one man's obsession with exploring digitally recreated memories/trauma. The game is being described as being like living in a movie, but player action will affect outcomes.

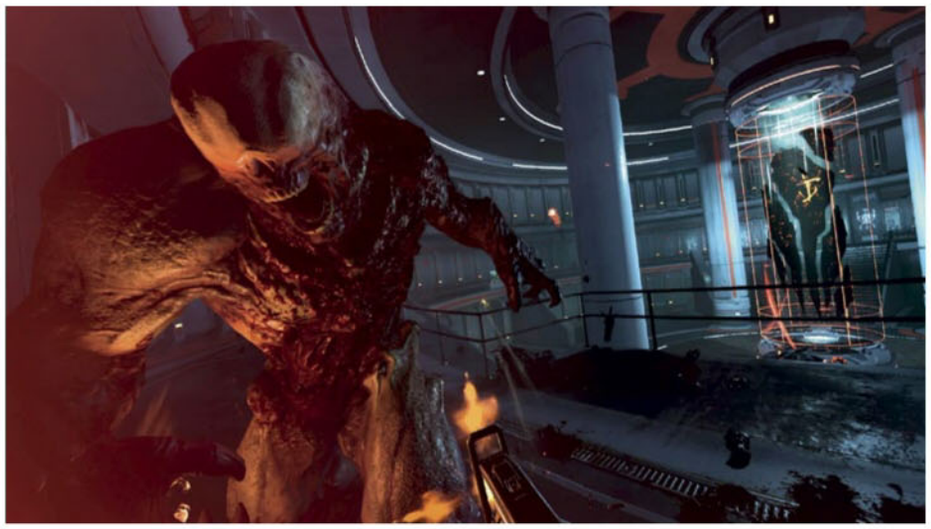
19

Need for Speed: Payback

20

DEVELOPER GHOST GAMES
PUBLISHER EA
DUE NOVEMBER 10
www.needforspeed.com

▼ In many ways, Need for Speed: Payback sounds a little something like Fast & the Furious: The Game, and we couldn't be happier. Players take the role of three drivers; Tyler (The Racer), Mac (The Showman) and Jess (The Wheelman) and pull off a number of action movie style sequences in an effort to take down an evil crime ring or some other nonsense. It's still open world, but the emphasis seems to be more on doing cool stunts in cars rather than just racing.



Doom VFR

DEVELOPER ID SOFTWARE
PUBLISHER BETHESDA SOFTWORKS
DUE 2017
store.steampowered.com/app/650000/DOOM_VFR

▲ While Bethesda's E3 presence was mostly expansions or remakes (with one stand-out sequel), Doom VFR (the F stands for exactly what you think it does) is actually one of the most exciting VR games on the horizon thanks to a mixture of familiarity, good looks and a new approach to Doom shooting courtesy of a mix of analogue and motion controls with the HTC Vive controller. Rather than simply being a VR version of the 2016 Doom, Doom VFR is a semi-sequel.

21

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AGENTS OF MAYHEM

We don't need another hero, but someone who won't run over so many pedestrians would be nice

BEST OF E3

DEVELOPER VOLITION
PUBLISHER DEEP SILVER
DUE AUGUST 18
www.aomthegame.com

Trying to be the good guy in a video games isn't always easy, especially when being bad is so much more fun. Be honest, if you were playing as Superman in a video game would you rather save a busload of passengers from going off a cliff, or lob that same bus into the side of the Daily Planet?

Sidestepping the heroes in an open-world game issue entirely, Agents of Mayhem instead plays with the notion of moral relativism. The Agents are here to save the world, whatever it takes. Drawing inspiration from '80s action cartoons, G.I. Joe in particular, Agents of Mayhem tells the story of the Multinational Agency for Hunting Evil Masterminds (Mayhem for short) as they battle the League of Evil Gentlemen Intent on Obliterating Nations (also known as Legion). Biding their time in the shadows, the Legion took over the entire world in less than a day in a global attack now referred to as the Devil's Night.

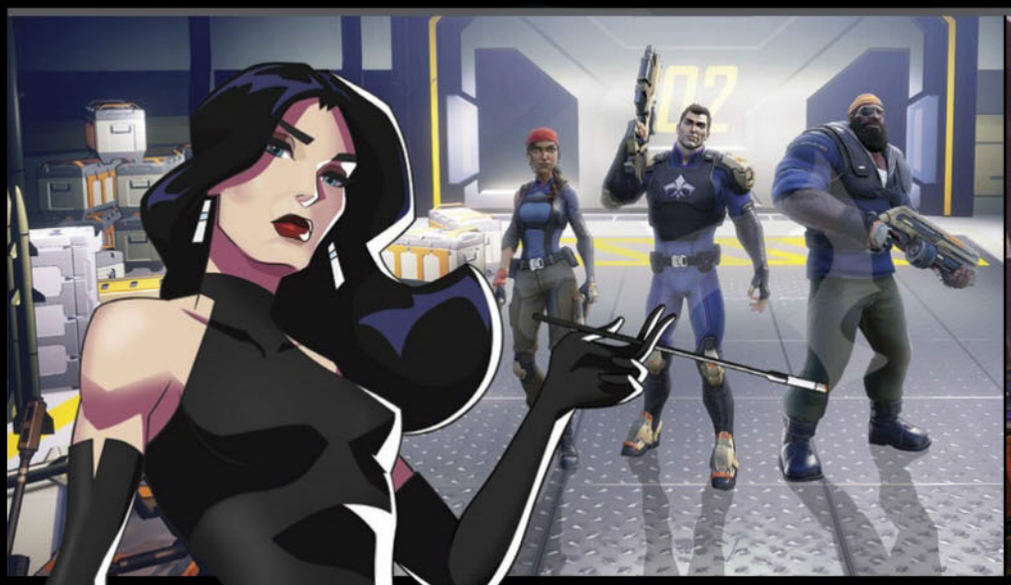
Spearheaded by their mysterious leader Morningstar, this new world order is maintained by Seven Ministries, one for each of the seven deadly sins, with a mad scientist named Doctor Babylon serving as the Minister of Pride in the South Korean city of Seoul. Cracks have begun to appear though. A ruthless Minister named Persephone Brimstone has abandoned Legion and become the leader of the Agents of Mayhem. Her true motivations remain unknown, and her new squad aren't exactly the good guys, but she is the best chance Earth has to be free again. In a world gone to shit, Brimstone and her Agents are the toilet brushes of justice.

We got our first glimpse of the Agents of Mayhem universe back in 2015 at the end of Saints Row: Gat out of Hell when Johnny Gat chose to let God recreate the Earth and retcon the Saints Row continuity. In that ending (which was one of a possible five) Gat and his crew had their histories rewritten and became cops working in Seoul. It's a short sequence without much context, but it does very briefly introduce us to Brimstone who's currently in police custody and just about to be interrogated by Gat.

There's plenty of nods to the Saints Row series here, such as the return of 3rd Street Saints member Pierce as an Agent codenamed Kingpin. Even Johnny Gat is back, though currently only as a downloadable character. Get your pre-orders in now! Sigh. To mix up things further, the Agents of Mayhem receive their funding from the Ultor Corporation, a fake conglomerate that has also appeared in Red Faction and Saints Row. The developers have made it clear this isn't a Saints Row sequel, but it does use some of the same toys from the toybox.

Think of it like this, Agents of Mayhem is to Saints Row what Mad Max: Fury Road was to Beyond Thunderdome. You can see a very clear and obvious connections, but don't bother trying to make it all fit perfectly.

At the core of Agents of Mayhem are the Agents themselves. Featuring twelve very different anti-heroes, the game allows you to take three Agents into battle at once and encourages you to swap between regularly. It takes literally only a few seconds to go from one Agent to another, with one teleporting in and taking the other's place.



As you'd expect, each Agent comes with their own unique abilities and finding the right mix is key to surviving in battle. During my play session the shotgun wielding German soccer hooligan Red Card was my go-to guy, but I also relied on a ripped Russian named Yeti and his ice cannon when backed into a corner. Another Agent I eventually found extremely useful was Fortune and her drone turret, which helped out a lot when dealing with fast moving enemies.

"I really like Oni," said Anoop Shekar, Design Director at Volition, "he was a Yakuza hitman in his former life. He uses a silenced pistol and he's really good at critical hits, I love being able to do that. [I also] really enjoy Rama, she's our bow wielder. She's really good at sniping from a distance, which is another way that I liked to play."

Other Agents include an ex-US Navy officer called Hardtack, a reality TV star nicknamed Hollywood, a ninja named Scheherazade, a drill sergeant called Braddock, a roller-derby and minigun enthusiast known as Daisy, and a fashion obsessed engineer called Joule.

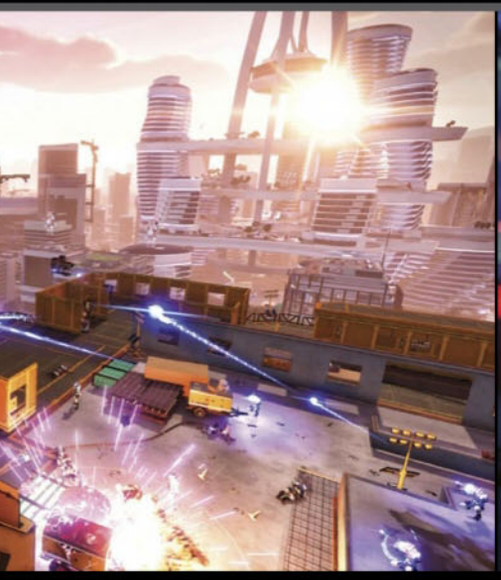
It's becoming a bit clichéd to say a game lets you play however you want, but Agents of Mayhem really does give you a lot of options. You're encouraged to stick to a mix of character types, but because you can take in three Agents it's easy to try a new one and swap back to old favourites when things get too dicey.

> "next to her was a bucket she must have spent time hovering over and evacuating into"

There's a healthy amount of content to unlock in Agents of Mayhem, including new character-specific skills, vehicles for cruising around the city, and skins to alter an Agent's look. Shekar said they chose not to include the same level of character customisation seen in Saints Row, with the main reason being they didn't want to treat the Agents like blank slates. These are very defined characters that players should be able to easily recognise, so taking away their intended design wouldn't make much sense.

"In Saints Row the customisation of the character was very important, visually especially," said Shekar. "We knew we weren't going to go that far in Agents of Mayhem because we wanted the Agents to be unique and identifiable … But we did want customisation, because [it's a] very important part of our games, so we decided to do more on the gameplay side. Whether it's changing the gadgets [or which] Agents you take with you, changing how their weapons work, or, of course, the Gremlin Tech."

Gremlin Tech are gadgets capable of dramatically altering the state of battle that can be assigned to any Agent. One of my favourites was a giant metal ball that I could teleport into battle, say



The purple hue is extremely reminiscent of Saints Row the Third.

at the top of a staircase, then sit back and watch it roll over my enemies. It would also magnetically suck enemies out of cover, making it great for drawn out gunfights. Another Gremlin Tech device lets players stick a remote controlled bomb to anything, which sounds harmless enough. That is until you stick it to a random pedestrian. You don't have to use it that way of course, but you know you're going to do that at least once.

To further flesh out the Agents, each one of them has their own story focused quest dedicated to them. Shekar said that originally the team wanted to use just cutscenes to explain who the Agents were, but they found making mini story missions not only encouraged players to try new Agents, it also helps the build-up the Agents of Mayhem lore. In keeping with its cartoon-ish styling, each character mission is presented like a very special episode of Agents of Mayhem, complete with unique dialogue and situations.

I tried Braddock's story mission first, which saw her chasing around a former soldier she trained at boot camp. As it turns out, Braddock was somewhat of an arsehole, and the emotional trauma she caused this guy made him turn to Legion. And, to add insult to injury, Braddock couldn't even remember his name. It's Hauser by the way. Well, it was before she vaporised him.

Another spotlight mission focused on the roller-derby star Daisy, who woke up in a shipping container and couldn't remember how she got there. Next to her was a bucket that she must have spent some time hovering over and evacuating into. Her hazy trip down memory lane takes her back to a sushi spot, triggering a flashback of her beating up the restaurant's robotic mascot.

These sepia toned memory sequences gave me a chance to see Daisy in action, wasting enemies with her minigun and generally being kind of belligerent. I also learned she was a very capable melee character and would skate her way through groups of enemies, knocking them down with ease. Giving each Agent the spotlight is definitely the right way to highlight characters players might otherwise have skipped. It makes sense in a game that features such a diverse cast, and speaking for myself, it showed me how characters that I might not normally have chosen would perform in combat.

YOU WATCH CARTOONS, BRO?

Comparisons between Crackdown 3 and Agents of Mayhem are inevitable, and for good reason - they both have roots in the early days of the Xbox 360, and both are open world action games with a strong focus of traversal and humour. Where Agents of Mayhem has the edge though is personality. I've played both games, and I see the value of their different approaches, but Agents of Mayhem has a cool '80s cartoon vibe that, in my eyes, trumps the dudebro-ish humour of Crackdown 3.

DIDN'T SEE THAT COMING

Volition want players to experience the story missions more than once, so to encourage return visits, enemy lairs are procedurally-generated. The logic being players won't have maxed out every character when they beat the game, and they're hoping this will keep dedicated players invested. Nice touch really.

"[We have] twelve agents that are all unique, and they're all really cool," said Shekar. "But there are no general favourites or disliked agents. When we do playtests everybody picks different agents, and have different ones that they like or dislike. And that to me means we're successful, because there's no clear 'everybody plays with these guys'.

It's not just the Agents that have a story to tell either, and it's really the villains who steal the spotlight in the main story missions. In order for the Agents of Mayhem to defeat Legion they first need to first chip away at its hierarchy, which means tracking down and eliminating their various lieutenants.

I took on the task of locating an insufferable 19-year-old popstar named Gaunt, who, as a member of the Ministry of Pride, is a key part of their plans to brainwash the youth of the world. The first part of the mission required my team to hack into his secured garage, which meant I had to take along an Agent with a hacking ability. Once inside I found his gaudy car but accidentally set off its obnoxious talking car alarm, drawing out a group of Legion soldiers. The firefight didn't last too long and soon enough I was able to track Gaunt down by following the smell of his overpriced cologne.

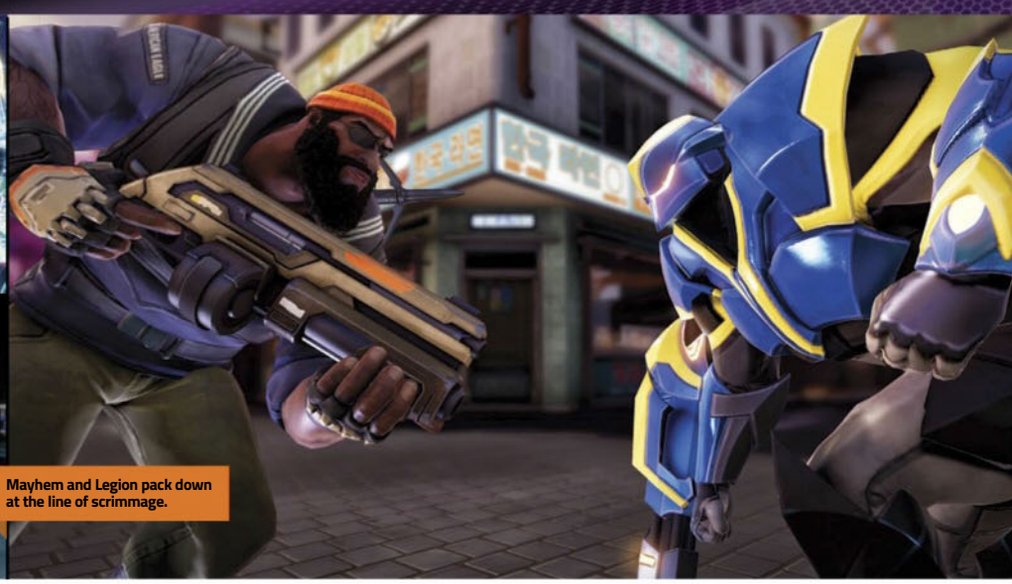
It took me across the city to one of his exclusive warehouse parties, which was filled with his fans dancing around in VR headsets. Feeling the net begin to tighten, Gaunt turned his fans into brain dead zombies, controlling their minds through the headsets. At first I figured I'd have to save everyone, but really my one true objective was to get Gaunt. Everyone else was expendable. Eventually I destroyed the computers broadcasting the mind controlling signals, even though I did put a lot of bullets through those very same brains. But it's the thought that counts.

When not on a mission, players can hang out at the Ark, the Agents' home base, and kill time playing with Gremlin Tech gadgets in the The Wreck Room. There's also the Vehicle Bay, which is home to vehicles you've unlocked, which can be called upon when back in the city, and a research area to discover new Gremlin Tech. Lastly, to make sure none of your Agents feel left out, there's the Global Conflict station, which enables you to send Agents out on special missions, free from your control. They'll return after a set period of time with new items and gained experience.

After spending some time in the Ark I went back into the city and took some time to wander around. I found myself admiring a ton of little details that have gone into Volition's take on Seoul. In one section of the city I explored lush green gardens lined with cherry blossom trees, then later that night I raced down the city streets in my sports car with its shiny exterior reflecting the neon skyscrapers. Volition's take on Seoul feels like a cleaned up cyberpunk metropolis with hints of Blade Runner and Miami Vice by way of Akira. The developers aren't going for realism here, they're going for style, and Agents of Mayhem is all the better for it.

Shekar said that using an existing city was quite a departure from Volition's usual method of making wholly original locations with real world influences. He noted that this version of Seoul is far from a one-to-one recreation, saying his team wanted to show gamers a place not often seen in video games, but not be slaves to how it actually looks in real life.

"We wanted to push the high-tech elements, but then juxtapose that against these traditional Asian elements," explained Shekar. "And then what we wanted to do, because we knew we were going to have these super agents with good traversal powers like triple jump, we wanted



Mayhem and Legion pack down at the line of scrimmage.

Meet rollergirl Daisy and her so-called minigun.

to make sure we were emphasising verticality and density. We didn't want to make a massive map, we wanted to make a place for you to explore, were everywhere you look there's something cool for you to find."

This break from reality extends into the gameplay too, with much of Agents of Mayhem designed to cut out the bullshit and keep you in the action. When you need to get somewhere you can call upon your sports car like Geralt whistling for Roach, except your ride will happily plow through traffic on its way to you and barely slow down as you teleport into the driver's seat.

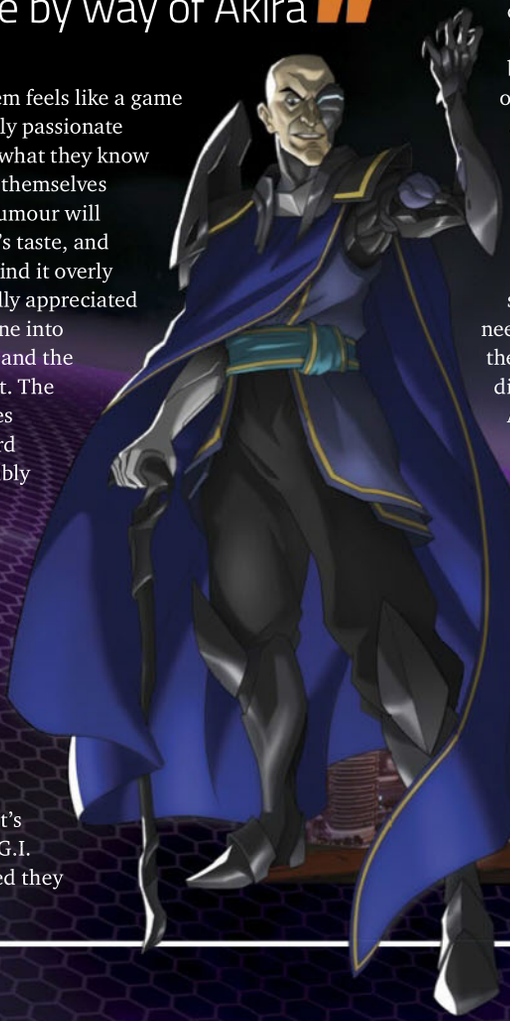
Racing around the city was a great way to kill time too, and I never felt particularly penalised for taking a shortcut through a shopping centre and hitting a few civilians. This isn't Grand Theft Auto V, though you can attract the attention of the authorities if you go too crazy. Collateral damage is part of the job, and it often leads to some pretty hilarious moments, but don't expect to be completely above the law.

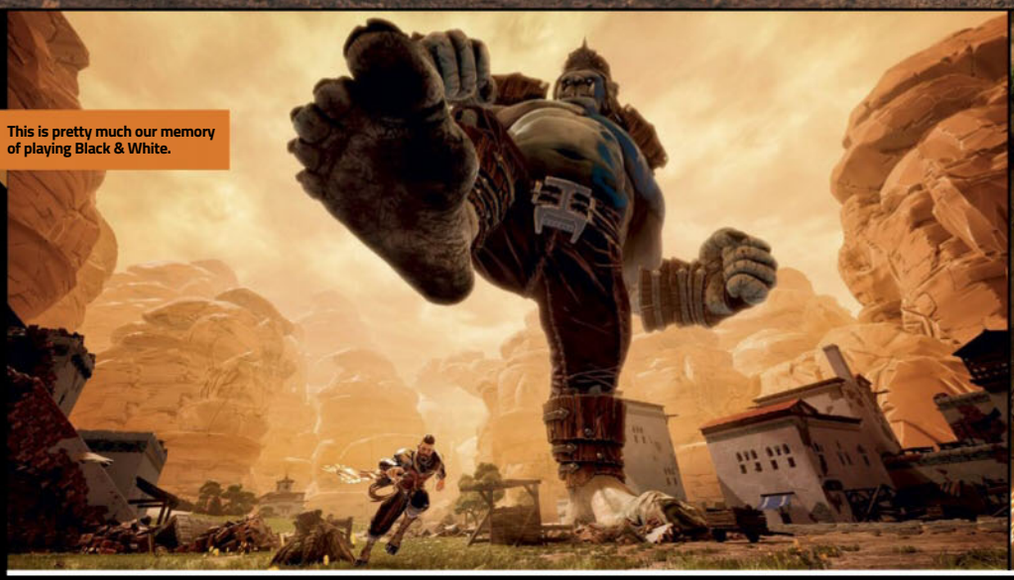
"For us [when we make an open world game we know] things are going to be funny," said Shekar. "So we thought we should take advantage of that, create more opportunities for that stuff to pay off. It's a trademark of Volition - we don't take ourselves too seriously."

> "Volition's take on Seoul feels like Blade Runner and Miami Vice by way of Akira"

Agents of Mayhem feels like a game made by a genuinely passionate team, building off what they know while still pushing themselves to do better. The humour will not be to everyone's taste, and truthfully I didn't find it overly hilarious, but I really appreciated the effort that's gone into creating the world and the characters within it. The animated sequences really struck a chord with me too. Probably because I grew up when Saturday morning cartoons were still a thing. That's what Agents of Mayhem is at heart; a Saturday morning cartoon made for adults in video game form. It's what the dudes in G.I. Joe probably wished they were doing instead of warning kids not to play with ovens.

When publisher THQ went bust back in 2013 there was little doubt Volition would survive the fallout. By then they'd built up a solid reputation off the back of Red Faction and, of course, Saints Row. Yet it's easy to forget that their last two titles, Saints Row IV and Gat out of Hell were not as warmly received as others in the series. Apparently all they needed to get back on track was the freedom to try something different, and after playing Agents of Mayhem, I'm glad they got it. *ANDREW WHITEHEAD* PC





This is pretty much our memory of playing Black & White.

EXTINCTION

Hopefully the title isn't a premonition of the end of the game

BEST OF E3

DEVELOPER IRON GALAXY
PUBLISHER MAXIMUM GAMES
DUE TBA
irongalaxystudios.com

What do you get when you take a bit of Attack on Titan, a smattering of Shadow of the Colossus, add in a pinch of Assassin's Creed, sprinkle some Dragon's Dogma on top, and put them all together? You get something that looks a lot like Extinction, a brand-new IP developed by Iron Galaxy and published by Maximum Games

Humanity in the fantasy world of Extinction is facing a terrifying threat. The kingdoms of this world, which have long warred with each other, became blind to a threat lurking right under their noses. The massive Ravenii ogres and their magical servants have risen, and they crave only for the complete destruction of human civilisations. Only a few specially trained soldiers known as "Sentinels" have the training and expertise required to slay the towering Ravenii, but as the conflict has dragged on, their numbers have been reduced to a mere few. You take control of one of the few remaining Sentinels, Avil, and wage an increasingly futile-seeming war against the Ravenii forces.

We were given the opportunity to get a look at a brief, pre-alpha demo of Extinction, and while it was short, it gave us a taste of the sort of combat we'll be expecting. Avil is a very nimble character who can perform numerous acrobatic feats, scale structures, even wall-run. As the game progresses, he'll be able to earn more skills through various gadgets created by his allies. The mobility – as well as the vertical movement – seemed reminiscent of the parkour-style movement seen in other games, though since our demo was of the controlled variety we can't really comment on the controls themselves.

> "we saw one of the giant ogres waltz into a city, smashing structures with his massive limbs"

What we can comment on, however, is the scale of the combat. When the Ravenii armies invade human strongholds, they bring their big guns – and a lot of small, annoying little jerks to back them up. We saw one of the giant ogres waltz into a city, smashing structures with his massive limbs. Even as a powerful Sentinel, it wouldn't take much more than a few fist-pounds for Avil to be mincemeat.

To combat the brutes, Avil had to make the most of his agility, scaling the monsters to debilitate them and hit their weakpoints. To slay the ogre in our demo, for example, Avil needed to first render it immobile by cutting off its limbs, dismembering the foul being in a delightful spray of blood and rendering it barely able to move. But Ravenii have incredible regenerative powers, so Avil only had a limited time to find the ogre's weakpoint – a spot in its neck covered by some weak wooden armour. We needed to cut through the armour and kill the giant, all the while being flanked by smaller demons eager to knock Avil down. Finally, with a sword fully empowered with the blood of injured foes, Avil could perform a stylish attack to slay the ogre for good.

Extinction is still a ways off, but from the sliver we've seen, it looks like a mix of strategic fighting and fast-paced action. Expect to see more as this game shapes up.

HEIDI KEMPS PC

Now just turn your head and show me that delicious little weakpoint.

STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT 2

DICE takes a "bigger is better" approach to sequel making

BEST OF E3

DEVELOPER DICE
PUBLISHER ELECTRONIC ARTS
DUE NOVEMBER 14
starwars.ea.com/starwars/battlefront

Star Wars Battlefront 2 improves on a lot of ideas 2015's Battlefront failed to deliver while introducing a much needed single player campaign. It's the first multiplayer game to include all three film eras, and according to producer Craig McLeod, modernises the series in the same way as the Rogue One film.

"We're taking the essence and the fantasy of this prequel era and these prequel battles," said producer Craig McLeod, "and bringing it into something that's really modern, feels very cohesive as you play through these differing eras.

"From a multiplayer perspective, people want[ed] all the eras… more heroes, more Star Wars characters, more progression and more team play," he continued. "All these things that create that breadth and depth that a DICE sandbox is so well known for."

Battlefront 2's multiplayer has also been improved with a traditional class-based infantry system - classic assault, heavy, and sniper classes, as well as a support who can buff their allies and deploy a mini-turret.

"The foundational idea with introducing a class system is to focus on team play," said design director Niklas Fegraues, "which is another thing we heard from players who played the first game. They wanted more ways to team up, play together and strategise. If you have a big multiplayer sandbox with soldiers and vehicles and so on, of course it's similar to Battlefield, but the important thing for us is to make sure this feels like a Star Wars battle."

DICE has replaced the blue collectable token needed to play as a hero with a system that rewards players contributing to their team using your battle points, in hopes of creating a fairer team-based environment.

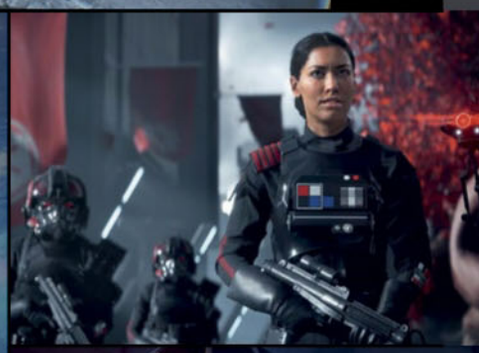
"What's really important is that we're trying to tell a story of the location [and] a fantasy," said McLeod. "When we think about what worked really well in the first game, [maps like] Walker, Song and Hawk worked because [we] finally got to be a part of the battles we'd hoped for… This is what's going to make this galactic assault signature game mode so unique. It will play differently to each location you go [to] but will be familiar to you as a Star Wars fan."

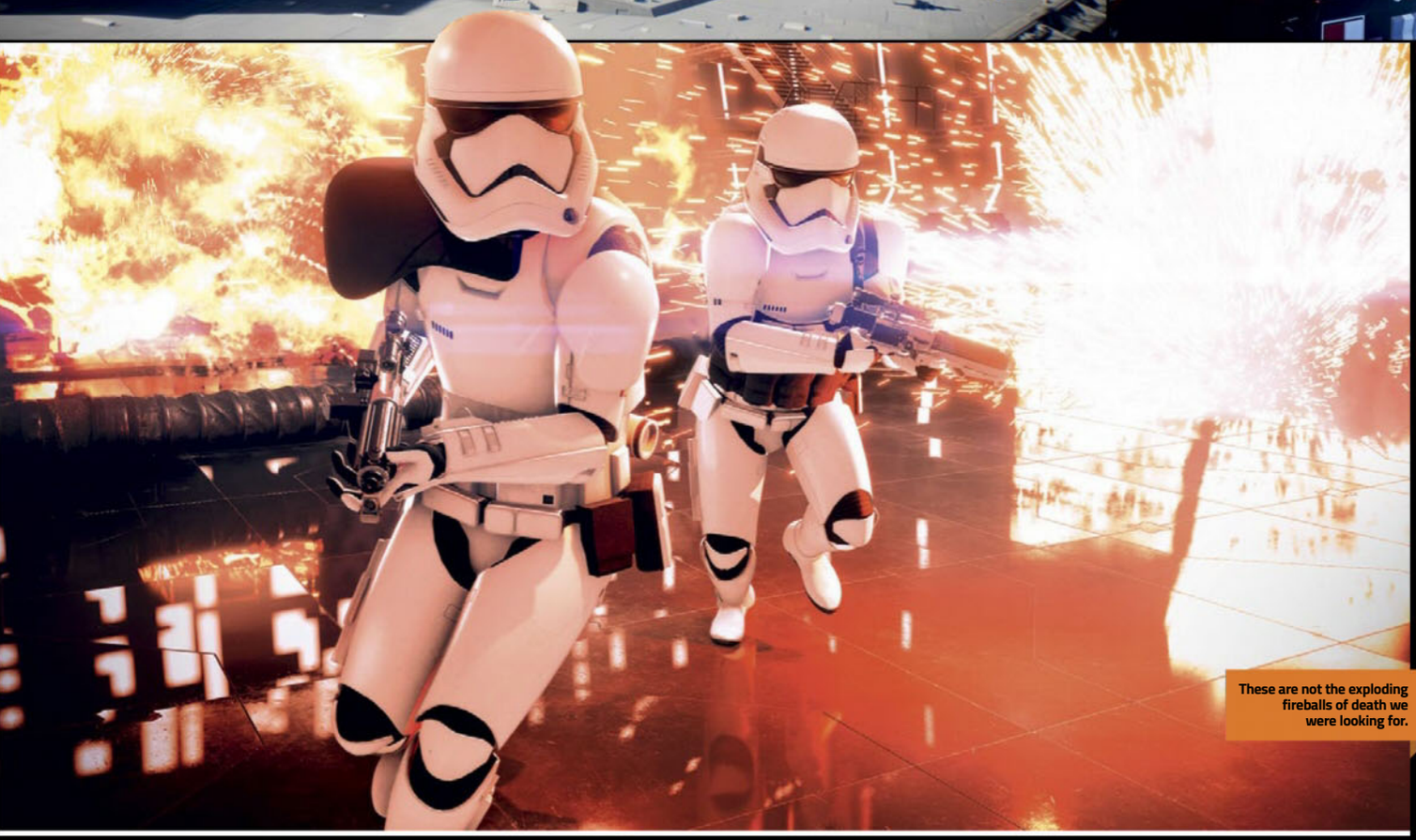
In many ways, Star Wars Battlefront was a test run for what Battlefront 2 aims to achieve. So far it's delivering with a fleshed out single player story from the Empire's perspective - spanning from the Return of the Jedi to the end of The Force Awakens, - a return to couch co-op in Skirmish mode, space battles co-developed by Criterion, and free post-game content.

"When we say, 'we want this to be the essential Star Wars shooter,' we can back that up with a story, with space, with deep multiplayer, with couch co-op and really all those elements that people love," said McLeod. "No matter how you want to engage with our entertainment and our game, you can do that." *JULIAN RIZZO-SMITH* PC

> In many ways, Star Wars Battlefront was a test run for Battlefront 2

The single player campaign can be seen as Episode 6.5.





These are not the exploding fireballs of death we were looking for.

We're still trying to work out what B.J. could stand for...

Bloody Jerries. Yeah, that's probably what it means.

WOLFENSTEIN II: THE NEW COLOSSUS

No time for Nazi puns, we gotta get Reich back to the killing

BEST OF E3

DEVELOPER BETHESDA
PUBLISHER MACHINEGAMES
DUE NOVEMBER 27
wolfenstein.bethesda.net

Everything about the reveal of Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus was perfect. The humour, the violence, the character moments - all of it showed that MachineGames don't need to resort to bullshit marketing and hyperbole. They're confident their game can sell itself. The reveal also help introduce the world to newcomers, yet it also showed returning fans that despite everything, the Nazis are still very much in control of America.

With the reveal out of the way I couldn't wait to get my hands on The New Colossus and find out what else I could learn about the world. As you may recall, the ending of The New Order (the last game in the story chronologically) featured our hero B.J. Blazkowicz accepting his fate and telling his friends to bomb the Nazi stronghold he was still inside of.

I was told the section I was going to play was about fifteen minutes into the game, so how Blazkowicz survived was left unexplained. My demo began with Blazkowicz waking up in a hospital bed onboard a ship with his lover Anya beside him. She tells him she's pregnant now, with his twins no less. But it doesn't take long for this moment of peace to be broken by news that the Nazis are coming, and they're looking for Blazkowicz.

It was about this time I realised everything wasn't alright with Blazkowicz. After casually shooting a few Nazis, he climbed into a wheelchair and suddenly I was in control. No longer a one man army, Blazkowicz couldn't even fire a gun without getting pushed back by the recoil.

Thankfully a familiar face named Seth Roth offered some help in the form of microwave traps he'd setup around the ship. Needless to say, I cooked my fair share of Nazis before the end of the demo. Even with that help it was clear the developers wanted me to feel vulnerable during my short time with the game. Blazkowicz might be back, and he's done some damage to the Nazi regime, but he hasn't won. Not yet.

In 1883 an American named Emma Lazarus wrote a poem that was later engraved onto a bronze plaque inside the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. She titled it The New Colossus, and it contains one of the most famous verses of all time - "Give me your tired, your poor / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free".

In naming their game after this poem, I think MachineGames are trying to tell us something. Personally, I believe it's their way of saying America isn't a perfect country, and sometimes

> "after casually shooting a few Nazis, he climbed into a wheelchair"

it falls short of its own ideals, but it's a far cry from the one seen in Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus. This is also what makes the plight of Blazkowicz so compelling; he's the embodiment of America at its most virtuous, and its most brutal. A hero to some, and a murderer to others. All I know for sure is I can't wait to see him again and crush some Nazi skulls.

ANDREW WHITEHEAD PC

VAMPYR

BEST OF E3

DEVELOPER DONTNOD
PUBLISHER FOCUS HOME INTERACTIVE
DUE LATE 2017
www.vampyr-game.com

DontNod, the French studio behind Remember Me and Life is Strange, is well regarded for the strong narrative elements their games feature. But their newest title, Vampyr, is something of a departure from the norm for them. While the game is still heavily narrative-driven – and filled with choices and moral quandaries with long-lasting consequences – the RPG-like structure of the game's exploration and combat is territory DontNod has not yet tread. But the game's been shaping up nicely over the past few years of development, and the demo we saw at E3 has us pumped about how this supernatural alternate-history adventure will play out.

In early 20th century London, disease and depravity run amok: the Spanish Flu runs rampant, a bizarre affliction turns humans into bloodthirsty cannibals, and vampires lurk among the population, feeding and killing in secret. One such vampire is Dr. Jonathan Reid, who lives a terrifying double life: a merciful, life-saving doctor in public, but a thirsty bloodsucker in the shadows. It makes for an incredibly stressful existence: While Dr. Reid wants to protect his beloved clientele from the horrors of these illnesses, his vampiric nature demands he feed upon them. To make matters worse, an order of vampire hunters is gunning for him and his ilk. How far will Dr. Reid go to survive, and will he sacrifice his own well-being for the sake of others?

As you explore the darkened streets of London, you'll find yourself among a cast of friendly and hostile characters – along with some undead horrors. By using your slick vampiric powers, you can carefully avoid threats (such as sensing an NPC's emotional state), but in some cases, you'll need to engage in battle. That's when your high-powered vampire skills really come into play: you can dash around like a terror in the night, sneaking up behind foes and unleashing a surprise attack. Or, you can make use of some of your vampiric skills, such as freezing your opponent's blood.

Other choices are more difficult. Dr. Reid's character development – and combat abilities – are acquired and enhanced by the blood he consumes as a vampire. Feeding is a tricky business: consuming the foes you encounter yields little, and the more blood you drink, the more powerful you become – but the more of London's populace you are forced to kill. A complex web of relationships that stretches across the city informs the actions of each individual character, and the death of one character at your hands can have a domino effect elsewhere. Take, for example, an old woman and her adult son. We saw a demo detailing their dysfunctional relationship – she abhors his drunken abuse but loves him regardless, and he loves her in turn. Yet the son harbours a vile secret: he's also a serial killer. Killing him for blood may seem like a good idea, but how would it affect his mother? Or, conversely, how would killing his mother – who bears superior blood quality – affect him? Only you can decide who to kill – or even to kill at all. *HEIDI KEMPS* PC

> "the RPG-like structure of the game's exploration and combat is territory DontNod has not yet tread"

Hmm, if only I could somehow use my vampiric powers for Good...

Just two lovers engaged in a midnight tryst. Move along.

This beast is gonna look great mounted in the pool room.

"Shhh, I'm a skilled hunter. I know those monsters are around here somewhere."

MONSTER HUNTER WORLD

At long last, the PC gets a proper Monster Hunter outing

BEST OF E3

DEVELOPER CAPCOM
PUBLISHER CAPCOM
DUE 2018
www.monsterhunterworld.com

Monster Hunter World is like an unofficial video game adaptation of Jurassic Park. A beautiful ecosystem of prehistoric creatures with a hierarchy of power and food chain. Prey and predators follow their natural instincts and hunt - sometimes you, other times your target. As a hunter, you can use this to your advantage, baiting your target towards another's nest, pitting them against one another, or use the environment to trap your prey before striking its weak points.

You play as a hunter who has travelled to the New World as a member of the Research Commission, exploring new unknown territories. Every time you leave town to explore the open world island, you'll need to scavenge and hunt rare creatures for materials, building new gear like a bowgun or armour set for you and your felyne - a feline companion that assists you on your journey.

Exploration and hunting require strategic thinking, extensive knowledge of the island's bestiary and precision, but according to game director Yuya Tokuda, Capcom aim to deliver an experience that doesn't feel as daunting for newcomers and single player fans. Bowguns play more like a heavy machine gun in a traditional third-person shooter and the animation of swinging a greatsword is slow but weighted. The UI doesn't show a target's health, just how much damage you deal, so you'll need to be aware of the change in your target's movement and behaviour.

In one scenario, a group of small parasitic reptiles watched at bay as the hunter downed a T-Rex-like beast using a cluster of vines and their greatsword, emerging from the shadows to help take down the traditionally stronger foe. Later, the hunter cautiously led the creature to a bird wyvern's nest, before the two enormous creatures fought each other, further weakening it as trees caught on fire and nearby critters fled the sounds of battle.

Running on Capcom's MT Framework engine, the game looks utterly beautiful. Environments look rich and lush with detail, dynamic lighting and each location differs in flora and fauna. Foliage and particle effects add to your immersion in tight scenarios, and along with the new slingshot item, can be used to distract or stun enemies.

"Scavenging interactions, survival of the fittest - all that stuff is really important to Monster Hunter," producer Ryozo Tsujimoto told Glixel. "We've always wanted to include it in the past, but the technology limited us. Now, we can have as much detail as want, not just in the environments but also in the monster AI and how they interact with each other."

"The concept of the 'open world' is exactly what we'[ve] always wanted," added Tokuda. "We're always aimed to make each map a little compact ecosystem. We don't want to have some massive space where you have to chase the monster for miles."

> "exploration an d hunting require extensive knowledge of the island's bestiary"

"It's not about having a big world," he continued, "it's about having a deep [one]. In a way, it's the ultimate expression of what the concept that's been there from the very start [of the series], but only now are we able to make it the way we want." *JULIAN RIZZO-SMITH* PC

CALL OF DUTY: WWII

Remember when Call of Duty was about killing Nazis and guns that went 'PING'?

BEST OF E3

DEVELOPER ACTIVISION
PUBLISHER SLEDGEHAMMER GAMES
DUE NOVEMBER 3
www.callofduty.com

Though Call of Duty: WWII was in development long before the Infinite Warfare/Modern Warfare Remastered debacle, it's fortunate that Activision had enough foresight to give this game the greenlight. Could you imagine if they announced another Call of Duty set in the near future? Thankfully, we don't live in the darkest timeline, so we get to enjoy killing Nazis in the 1940s once more.

Of course, the return to World War II wouldn't mean anything if developer Sledgehammer Games did nothing meaningful with it. Which is why the new War multiplayer mode is such a great addition. You may recall another mode call War from World at War, but the two are barely related.

War is a story-driven, asymmetrical multiplayer mode that sees one side trying to capture points on a map, and the other trying to hold off the invasion until the clock runs out. War uses dedicated maps, not just repurposed deathmatch ones, and each of them has a little storyline of their own.

Operation Breakout was the map chosen for my play session, which follows a small band of Allied troops fighting their way across the French countryside. Their first objective was to take over a mansion and create a forward operating base, then push forward and take out AA guns controlled by Axis forces.

Just getting inside that damn mansion was a real team effort. After using smoke grenades to hide our numbers, myself and a few others covered all the entrances and shot anything that moved. It took a while, but eventually we claimed the first control point and were on the move again.

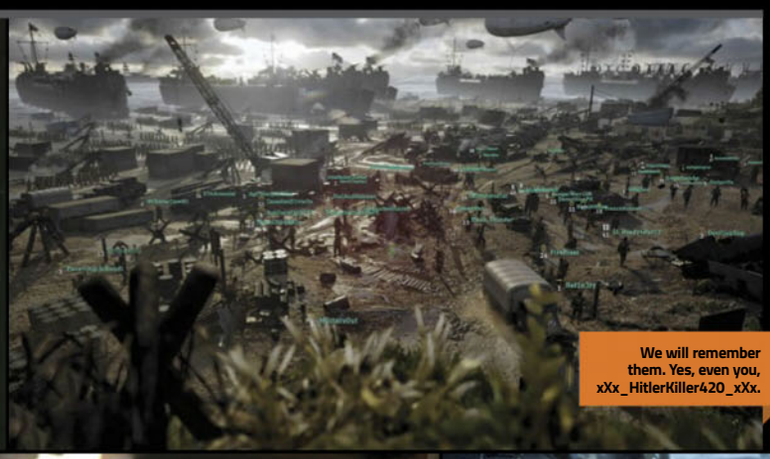
Each control point presented its own unique challenge, with the next one requiring us to build a bridge to advanced our invasion. Though there is always a narrative reason for each objective, the way you actually complete them is the same - find where you need to be, stand there, and don't die. That's how we built our bridge, but it would have been much easier if the other team weren't shooting at us. Dicks.

The battle continued until our final objective which had us escorting a friendly tank to get it in range of the AA guns. Victory came down to the wire, with my team winning during overtime thanks to a few smart players sticking to the payload… I mean, tank.

Big plans are in place for Call of Duty: WWII, such as a Headquarters area for players to hang out and shoot the breeze instead of each other. There's also an ambitious single-player campaign, and, of course, Zombies.

> "War uses dedicated maps, not repurposed deathmatch ones, and each of them has a little storyline of their own"

But in all honesty, it's the fact that Sledgehammer Games bothered to make this War mode that has me the most excited. It shows that they 'get it'. They know Call of Duty can be great again, it just needs a little kick in the arse. And now that the shellshock of the past year has worn off, I get the feeling that a lot of lapsed fans will have their boots firmly back on the ground come November. *ANDREW WHITEHEAD* PC



We will remember them. Yes, even you, xXx_HitlerKiller420_xXx.

Tanks for the memories of when Call of Duty was good.

Games 264

YOUR GUIDE TO PC GAMES

Something old, something new...

Blowing the dust off old games

There's a lot of sequels and reboots this month. The seventh Tekken game, the sequel to a wonderful Australian indie zombie survival game, a relaunch of an old MMO, and the latest in a long series of strategy games from one of the most focused developers in the industry.

Everyone always says that the games industry is overtaking the more established film industry - it's true, too, but one of the byproducts of this is that it's also falling into some of the same traps. Hollywood has long had a thing for remakes and reboots (how many damn Spiderman reboots are we going to get?!), preferring to play things safe with mega-budget movies. A lot of game publishers are doing much the same, and like the film industry, this means you really need to look to the indies for the real innovation and fresh ideas.

Thankfully we have some of those this month, too.

David Hollingworth
Digital Editor

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POWERED BY
REPUBLIC OF GAMERS

SCORING SYSTEM | PCPP scores its games on a 1 to 10 scale. The higher, the better – though 10 is by no means a "perfect" game. We're not convinced such a thing exists, so consider a 10 a masterpiece of PC gaming, despite its inevitable flaws. A 5 is a decidedly average game; one that doesn't excel in any particular area, without being an affront to our senses – the ultimate in mediocrity. Below this, you'll start to find the games our reviewers suffered an aneurysm getting through; above it, the titles truly worth your time and money. And remember: a score is only a vague indication of quality. Always read the full review for the definitive opinion!

WE PLAY ON:

ALIENWARE
GAME VICTORIOUS

SAMSUNG
950 PRO

Tekken 7

Pro Tip: Don't throw your kid off a cliff

DEVELOPER BANDAI NAMCO
PUBLISHER BANDAI NAMCO
PRICE $49.99
AVAILABLE AT STEAM
tk7.tekken.com

Tekken 7 is a heap of crazy bullshit wrapped around one of the most solid fighting frameworks in years, and that is exactly what makes the game so good. The developers have concentrated on the fundamentals of any fighting game - a compelling roster of well-balanced characters, and a tight cohesive and powerful fighting engine, delivering the best overall Tekken game in years. That said, the game does feel safe. It doesn't feature the type of innovation or experimentation that typified many of the earlier games in the series, making the game, in some ways, feel more like a very proficient tribute act than the headliner itself.

Let's start with the good. The new additions to the fighting engine, few as they may be, are excellent. Chief amongst these are Rage Art and Rage Drive. In previous games being reduced to low health conferred a damage boost, making it slightly easier to mount a comeback. This mechanic has been reworked into something more spectacular and situational. When reduced to your last sliver of life, two one-shot options become available. The Rage Art is essentially a Street Fighter-style super move that unleashes a devastating combo capable of inflicting a huge amount of damage (around a third to two-fifths health) if it connects, potentially changing the course of a fight in a single hit. These moves have a set range and are blockable, so are quite volatile in usage. Rage Drives on the other hand are combos with enhanced damage (much like past iterations of Rage), and whilst they aren't as devastating as Rage Art moves, they are safer as they aren't an all or nothing proposition. Of course, while in Rage characters still do more damage with attacks. Using a Rage Art or Drive consumes all Rage, so ultimately it may be even better not to use any moves at all.

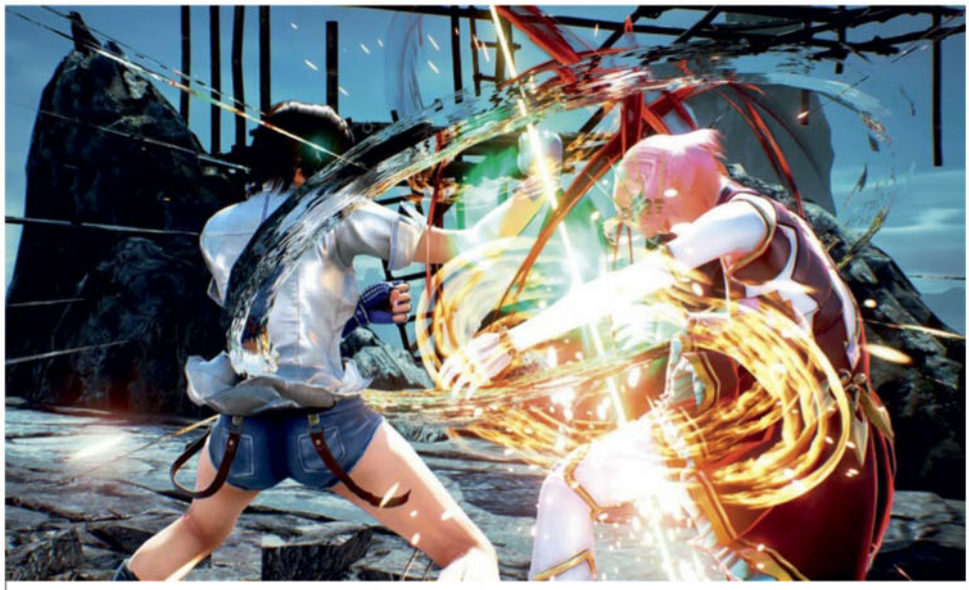
The Rage moves are the most obviously noticeable additions to Tekken 7 but they aren't the only changes that have been made. Perhaps the most interesting addition are the Power Crusher moves. These are attacks that are partially armoured and uninterruptible against high and mid attacks but vulnerable to low attacks and throws. Power Crushers add an interesting new dynamic to fights, especially given how important ranging and interrupting pokes are to the flow of combat. Combo scaling has also been tweaked, with damage diminishing more quickly as the number of hits in a combo grows. It's still more than possible to trap someone in a long combo, carry them across the stage and end with a wall splash, but rather than being a game ending combo it will instead only be devastating. It's a small change but one that feels right in the scheme of things and makes fighting more about give and take rather than endless juggles.

The lengthy story mode finally ends the saga of the Mishima clan, with father and son Heihachi and Kazuya finally sorting out their differences in the only way possible in Tekken - lots of punching, some lengthy cutscenes, multiple explosions, a cheap boss battle and enough crazy bullshit to fill a dozen lesser fighting games. For the most part the

story mode is compelling, with some great, insane cutscenes that know exactly when too much isn't enough, and some excellent nostalgia thrown in for good measure in between fights that see a number of the roster punching each other for hilariously nebulous reasons, culminating with the final showdown between father and son. Unfortunately the story mode is bogged down by some of the worst, most disaffected and dreary voice acting in recent memory when it comes to exposition by a character known as "the journalist." He narrates the events leading up to and in between different Mishima Zaibatsu/G-Corp shenanigans along with a personal tale of woe told with all the pathos of the clinically dead.

Unfortunately outside of the Mishima clan, every other character is given a short shrift. The Arcade mode doesn't feature any character endings or cutscenes, and the only character stories are found in single fights that are unlocked after the main story mode is finished. These fights are only slightly more meaningful than the cutscenes that players are rewarded with afterwards. Granted, a few are quite funny, but a character based story mode it isn't.

As far as single player content is concerned, outside of the Mishima saga, players have three choices, an arcade mode, treasure mode and practise mode, only two of which really serve a purpose. Arcade mode and treasure mode are by and large the same, but the latter rewards players with costume pieces, currency and other items that go towards the robust character customisation options that make up a good deal of the personality of the game. The fact that players are rewarded for playing treasure mode makes it far more satisfying that the basic arcade mode. Practise mode is just that, a mode in which players can practise, but the only time you'll ever really spend there is when waiting for online matchmaking - rather than simply staring at a matchmaking

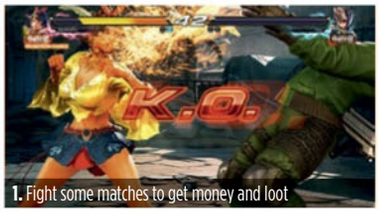


"the netcode is very solid, all but guaranteeing a good connection free from frustrating dropouts"

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You want to punch your abusive father
+ You want to punch your fiendish son
+ You want to punch your dead mother
+ You want to punch a pop idol
+ You want to be punched by a pop idol

SEQUENCE
WINNING AT TEKKEN



1. Fight some matches to get money and loot

2. Equip loot to look rad and play more matches

3. Win hearts and minds as a hipster monkey

DISCO AKUMA

1. In keeping with his Streeties heritage, Akuma is the only character with a super bar

2. Your character level determines matchmaking. It works very well online

3. This sweet emergency light hat turns on when the character is on 20% life. Sadly it doesn't make him throw his hands in the air and party

4. Apparently this sexy leather fetish gear is actually "Barbarian Armour"

5. Likewise, these sweet and sassy leather chaps are just cowboy pants

6. Treasure battles always have rewards

screen, players can instead opt to jump into practise mode to hone their skills and be transported directly from there to an arena when a match is made. Unfortunately, Team Battle, one of the best game modes in which players can make a team of up to eight fighters to fight against an AI or opponent team is missing. Given that the mode has been a mainstay of the franchise since Tekken 2 came out in 1996, its absence is definitely noticeable.

You'd hope that given the decent but uninspired offline component, the online performance would definitely make up for it, and it does, in spades. The netcode is very solid, all but guaranteeing a good connection free from frustrating dropouts, but more than that, the entire game is built to make online play feel exactly the same as offline play. The entire game works on a slight delay, giving online play a window to smooth out connection and ensuring that the frame timing ultimately feels the same if you're playing someone halfway around the world or sitting next to you on a couch. It works quite brilliantly. Online feels great and the rank based matchmaking works well to give a continual difficulty curve and challenging opposition. The fact that you can be demoted if you lose a few fights is frustrating, but when compared to everything that the online game does well it's water under the bridge.

The PC version of Tekken 7 is without a doubt (and without bias) the best when it comes to performance, running at a solid 60FPS at 1080p on our current test machine, an i7 laptop sporting a 1070, and similarly well (though without all the bells and whistles turned on) on an older setup featuring a R9 380. So why the overall tone of slight disappointment? Tekken 7 looks great and has an excellent fighting engine, but given the way the series has innovated in the past and gifted players with an excess of extra content like Tekken Ball, Tekken Bowl and Tekken Force (not to mention Team Battle), the lack thereof makes the game feel empty outside of playing online. At least it does that job brilliantly. *DANIEL WILKS* PC

OR TRY THIS:

MORTAL KOMBAT XL
NETHERREALM STUDIOS, 2015
▲ Best MK game yet
▼ 2D

DEAD OR ALIVE 5: FINAL ROUND
TEAM NINJA, 2015
▲ Good technical fighter
▼ So much expensive DLC

SKULLGIRLS
LAB ZERO GAMES, 2013
▲ Fantastic 6-button fighting
▼ Skullgirls 2 not out yet

VERDICT:

The online game is excellent but the lack of some beloved features is very irksome.

8

Zafehouse Diaries 2

Please stop replacing esses with zeds, thank you

DEVELOPER SCREWFLY STUDIOS
PUBLISHER SCREWFLY STUDIOS
PRICE $6.99
AVAILABLE AT STEAM
zafehouse2.com

Anthony, Juan, Lisa, Joshua and Karen made it to Lumpkin Springs. The fragile group consists of a police officer, a nurse, a priest, a salesperson and a carpenter. Karen isn't adjusting well to the group. Hopefully, Joshua can hold things together."

This is my introduction to Zafehouse Diaries 2, a mostly text-based zombie survival sim set in generic suburbia where Lavender St meets Cinnamon St and there's still a bank in the middle of town. There are five sandbox missions of increasing difficulty and when you start each it procedurally generates the layout of the town, the items and enemies you'll find in each house, and the five survivors who compose your group.

Joshua is the salesperson, it turns out. He's also "uncomfortable around women," apparently. I've already picked him as the weak link in the group. He is one of two characters who doesn't start the game equipped with a weapon so I task him with searching the (s)afehouse.

Karen is the carpenter, of course, and she has nothing but red lines to the rest of the group on the relationship chart. We've only just begun the mission and already she thinks she's a superstar. I click on her stats and note she's got five stars for the barricade skill. I put her to work dismantling microwaves and kettles, the initial step of constructing a sturdy fortress, as any five-star carpenter would know.

Anthony and Lisa get along, possibly because they're the oldest in the group. And possibly because they both own pistols. Neither of them like Karen, for reasons that aren't immediately apparent, though they seem sad at the lack of kettles in the house. Anthony doesn't like Juan either, but Juan has a shotgun so he's not going to voice his disapproval too loudly.

These five survivors won't be surviving much longer.

> I put her to work dismantling microwaves, the initial step of constructing a sturdy fortress

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You get excited finding three shotgun shells
+ You like reading diaries on stormy nights
+ You want to be in charge at the end of the world

From the town map I instruct Anthony, Lisa and Juan to investigate the houses along Cinnamon St. They report back each time, informing me of the number of zombies they spotted inside each abode and whether it contained any useful salvage. 49 Cinnamon St looks the best bet. According to Anthony's "very confident" report, there's food and medical supplies inside and only a handful of zombies.

With the place now scouted, the three of them breach the house. Anthony entered via the bedroom window while Lisa and Juan took the bathroom. I hear some scuffling noises and blood spatters across the pages of the diary as a prelude to the full report.

"The fighting took place throughout the house. They killed eight zombies. Lisa and Juan were injured in the fight."

Lisa's injuries were worse. Lacerations to her chest, stomach and legs. Juan's okay to search the house and I get Anthony to patrol in case any more zombies turn up. They grab the food, some painkillers, bandages, some rifles rounds and a machete, rest for a few hours and then head back.

Anthony, Lisa and Juan returned to the (s)afehouse. Joshua quietly waited for the right moment and let them inside. He's still holding things together. *DAVID WILDGOOSE* PC

OR TRY THIS:

PROJECT ZOMBOID
THE INDIE STONE, 2013
▲ Isometric
▼ Still early access

STATE OF DECAY
UNDEAD LABS, 2013
▲ Base building
▼ Too many graphics

DIARIES OF A SPACEPORT JANITOR
SUNDAE MONTH, 2016
▲ Diaries
▼ Trash

VERDICT:

A tense and demanding procedurally-generated story-telling device.

8

Get Even

Un Even

DEVELOPER THE FARM 51
PUBLISHER BANDAI NAMCO
PRICE $29.99
AVAILABLE AT STEAM
www.getevengame.com/en

Sometimes games tell great stories through interaction, inference and player involvement. Other times games tell great stories through more traditional means, with linear plotting narrative beats and an overall structure designed to tell the one story that the developers want to tell. Get Even is an example of the latter type of game. It tells a fantastic story of memory, manipulation, betrayal and revenge through fairly traditional, if somewhat flashy means. It also doesn't really require the player to participate to tell the story. Get Even is a great thriller, but it's not thrilling to play - it's more like a good movie that pauses every few minutes forcing you to press a button on the remote control to start it up again.

Players take the role of Cole Black (take a second to appreciate how cheesily awful that name is), a hard man who after failing to save a girl with a bomb strapped to her chest awakens in an abandoned mental asylum, soon after encountering a mysterious voice that gives instructions and ignores inquiries. He's there to help Cole, he says, and that the Pandora headset he is wearing will allow him to recover his memories and aid with his treatment. And what a treatment it is. Cole prowls the halls of the asylum, using his magic phone to solve puzzles in an attempt to find images that spark memories, throwing Cole into a scene from Cole's past and, for the most part, radically changing the gameplay mechanics.

In the asylum Cole is concerned with finding clues and solving simple, survival horror-style puzzles. The main tool at his disposal is his phone which has a number of apps dedicated to investigation and police work. There's an infrared camera app allowing Cole to see heat and cold, another that scans for evidence, and one that shows footprints and blood stains. It's all very silly but for the most part functional and it's breezily enjoyable. In memories, Cole becomes more of a man of action, sneaking and shooting enemies, either with his pistol or with his Corner Gun, a weapon, that as the name suggests, can be used to shoot around corners without exposing Cole to danger (*They exist and are pretty rad, too - Ed.*). The shooting is far less successful than the puzzling. It's clunky, slow and the stealth feels half-baked. There are some cool ideas in both the combat and the puzzling, but the end result feels like the developers had too many ideas and spread their talent and resources too thin, making each component feel too shallow to be satisfying.

The story of Get Even is very good and has some nice psychological trickery in it, and the soundtrack is genuinely excellent with some fantastic ideas that really lend themselves to the idea of fallible memories, but neither of these factors are strong enough to make up for the game's shortcomings. The mechanics never fully gel together and never really change, leading to a quite monotonous cycle of puzzling and shooting. *TAVISH FORREST* PC

Now say "Cheese!" At the protagonist's name, that is.

> Cole prowls the hall of the asylum, using his magic phone to solve puzzles

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You want a magic phone
+ Your name is an allusion to the colour of your heart
+ You like to shoot around corners

OR TRY THIS:

LAYERS OF FEAR
BLOOBER TEAM SA, 2016
▲ Insane artistry
▼ Walking simulator

THE CAT LADY
HARVESTER GAMES, 2012
▲ Emotional psychological horror
▼ Disturbing

THE TOWN OF LIGHT
LKA, 2016
▲ Mature exploration of mental illness
▼ Harrowing

VERDICT:

The story is great but the surfeit of ideas means that none are fleshed out particularly well.

6

Secret World Legends

Great Old One now Free to Play

DEVELOPER FUNCOM
PUBLISHER FUNCOM
PRICE $FREE
AVAILABLE AT STEAM, OFFICIAL SITE
secretworldlegends.com

At its core The Secret World was about its universe and story. Secret World Legends doesn't change that. Instead it revamps a lot of the more complicated game systems to allow players to focus on the game's narrative strengths.

It's the same alternate-universe where all our myths, legends, and stories are true. It's the same quests and brain-busting puzzles for you to unravel while interacting with the same memorable characters.

If you played TSW and didn't like those things, Legends won't be a game you enjoy, but if instead you didn't like game systems such the combat, crafting, or somewhat directionless skill wheel, there's some good news!

First off though, even if you played TSW previously, be prepared to start from square one. New character creation, new tutorial, the works. You can link a TSW account to transfer some cosmetic items, but that's all; somewhat understandable when you consider the scope of the changes.

There's a different and reduced set of classes. Though you'll be fighting the same enemies with what are pretty similar skills, the classes are better defined, making it easier to understand how they fit in to MMO archetypes and how challenging they are to play. There is now also a combat point spending system that works differently for each weapon type, but is timed like a cooldown rather than relying on builder skills to gain spender points.

Combat moves away from MMO-style select target and click skill, to a more action-based system using a manually aimed reticule for ranged attacks and player-centred area of effect skills. It can make targeting a particular enemy difficult sometimes, but because enemies also seem to have been weakened, it's easy enough to draw them in with ranged attacks and finish them off in close with AOE.

The tutorial is much more impressive this time around.

> "classes are better defined, making it easier to understand how they fit MMO archetypes"

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You dig Stephen King.
+ You dig Lovecraft.
+ You dig where you shouldn't and awake things best left sleeping.

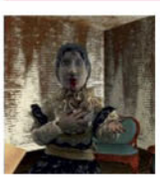
Crafting no longer requires obtuse build pattern arrangements, and gear upgrades are now simple drag and drop affairs that use your trash gear to level the stuff you want to keep. It's a nice way to keep players' gear progressing along with their level.

Oh, levels are back by the way. TSW's "no levels" system was interesting in that it sometimes required a change in approach when faced with difficult missions rather than grinding mobs until strong enough to tackle them, but it led to careful gameplay that could border on lethargic, so Legends does away with it entirely. Players gain levels, and still get action points (AP) to spend on active skills, and skill points (SP) to spend on passive skills. Each is depicted in skill trees that show clearly what the player is unlocking and working toward.

In 2012, I said of TSW in these pages "I love this game, unequivocally. And I sincerely hope you do too." Secret World Legends is faster, more immediate, easier to play and understand, but the things I loved – its characters, its writing, and its world – are still intact. And it's entirely free to play now too, so you really have no excuse. *TERRENCE JARRAD* PC

OR TRY THIS:

THE SECRET WORLD
FUNCOM, 2012
▲ The original's still running!
▼ Getting very empty



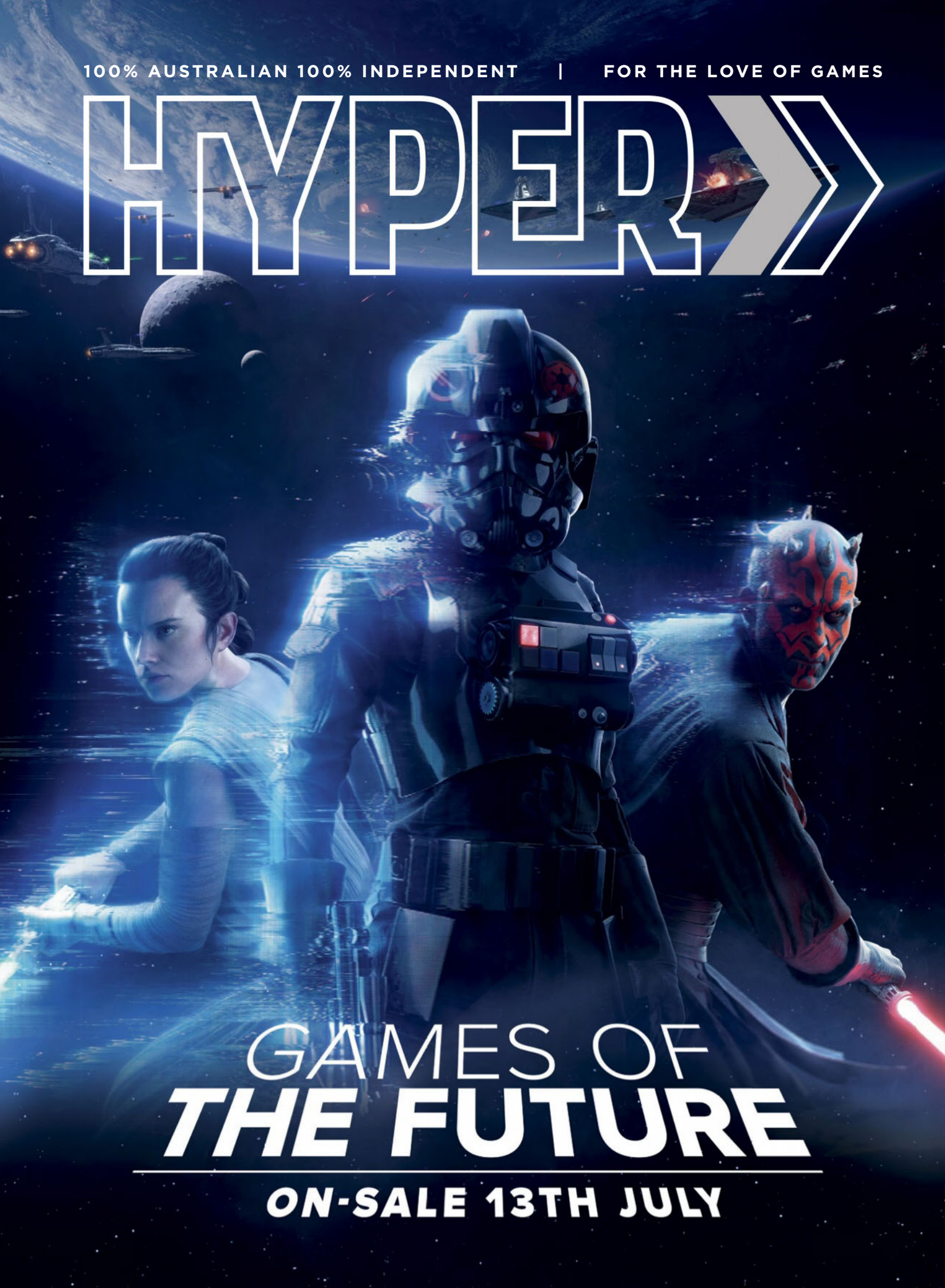
THE DARK EYE
INSCAPE, 1995
▲ Edgar Allan Poe meets Myst
▼ Good luck finding it.

CALL OF CTHULHU
CYANIDE, 2017
▲ Lovecraftian survival horror
▼ Not out yet.

VERDICT:

Writhing out of its niche, slithering, roiling tentacles endlessly grasping for the larger audience it most definitely deserves.

8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DVD Contents

Siblings can be a pain in the nether regions, but it's one of the most awesome feelings in the world they've got your back. Alongside the Supernaturally dreamy Winchester brothers, there's no better sibling to have this month than our very own sister magazine, PC & Tech Authority who have persuaded the good people at ESET to extend their offer of a free 12 month trial subscription of their amazing Internet Security package to lucky PCPP readers. The installers are located on the disk for Windows 32bit, 64bit and Mac, and the free subscription offer is only a click away on the banner below. Remember, if it's not on... it's not ON.

And since family's the name of the game, check out the astonishingly good Ambre, a kinetic novel with a twist. Then, head over to The Elder Scrolls: Legends for some card gaming action.

The PCPP Team.

42 FREE GAMES, DEMOS & UTILS!

- </reality> Demo
- AIRIS
- Ambre - a heartbreaking kinetic novel
- Arcane Maelstrom Demo
- BeeFense Demo
- Chuusotsu - 1st Graduation: Time After Time Demo
- Confess My Love
- Creatures Such as We Demo
- Demon Mark: A Russian Saga Demo
- Detective Butler: Maiden Voyage Murder
- Dyadic Demo
- ESET Cybersecurity Pro 9 for Mac
- Full version of Eset Internet Security (32 bit)
- Full version of Eset Internet Security (64 bit)
- Get To The Orange Door Demo
- Gobernators (Parodia poltica peruana)
- Hellpoint Demo
- Herald: An Interactive Period Drama - Book I & II Demo
- Immersion Chess
- Learn to Fly 3
- Manipulated Demo
- Mega Overload VR Demo
- Mirt. Tales of the Cold Land: Chapter One
- MMM: Murder Most Misfortunate Demo
- Nadia Was Here Demo
- Necrosphere Demo
- Neighbourhood Necromancer Demo
- Omega Pattern Demo
- Omina Mortis Demo
- One Hit KO Demo
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- Ramify Demo
- Remember, Remember Demo
- ROBOT MASTER Demo
- Soft Body Demo
- The Elder Scrolls®: Legends™
- The Falconers: Moonlight Demo
- Trapped With the Dolls VR
- WAGAMAMA HIGH SPEC Demo
- Welcome to Moreytown Demo
- XOXO Droplets Demo
- Zombidle REMONSTERED

The Elder Scrolls: Legends

Installation instructions included on the disc. Browse the disc and launch **index.html** for more.

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Simply click the install/download link under a file's description to launch the installation program. please ensure that all other programs are closed and that any anti-virus software is disabled before performing a software installation. Due to STEAM region locking, not all content may be available toutside Australia.

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- SHOULD YOU MAKE THE JUMP?
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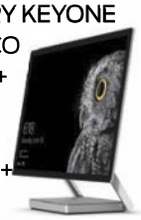

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Diablo-Type

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PUBLISHER ALKEMI
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AVAILABLE AT STEAM
www.drifting-lands.com

Side-scrolling action RPGs, or side-scrolling games with RPG elements are becoming pretty commonplace in the indie scene, with numerous games combining action platforming with loot gathering and inventory management. Drifting Lands bucks this trend and sets out on a relatively new course, mashing together an old-school side-scrolling shooter with some bullet-hell elements with random loot drops, unlockable skills and an RPG style progression system. It's not always the most successful of fusions, but more often than not it makes for a compelling and enjoyable shoot and loot experience.

When it comes to story, Drifting Lands veers more towards the side-scrolling shooter side than the RPG side. It's rather cursory and eminently forgettable. You play a hotshot pilot after a cataclysm that has broken the world into floating islands or something. The Brass doesn't like you but you can prove yourself by completing dangerous missions and blah, blah, blah. When it comes to action though, Alkemi quickly shows it has a grasp on the fundamentals of both shooter and RPG design, with the two seamlessly meshing to very satisfying effect. Shoot your way through waves of enemies, grab loot and money, and use that loot and money to upgrade your ship before the next mission.

Rather than having character classes, players instead have three classes of ship they can initially choose from – a fast glass cannon, balanced fighter or a slow tank. Throughout the game the player can upgrade their ship and buy the others, chopping and changing between them as fits a mission. Each component of a ship is essentially an inventory slot that can be upgraded through random pickups dropped by enemy ships or purchased at a rather exorbitant price from a vendor. Upgrading engines boosts speed, manoeuvrability and can also boost the power of special abilities, armour gives more health and so on.

The limited backgrounds might end up giving you the blues.

> mashing together an old-school side-scrolling shooter with an RPG-style progression system

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You always wanted R-Type to have an inventory system

+ You think bullet-hell needs customisation

+ You're sick of Metroidvania RPGs

In addition to being able to upgrade the ship, players can also equip up to four active abilities and two passive abilities. Active abilities are essentially the spells of Drifting Lands, working on a cooldown timer but having a palpable effect, creating shields, repairing damage done to the ship, doing massive damage or the like. Passive abilities enhance the ship in a more subtle way, the most important being the ability to automatically retreat from combat if you take too much damage, leaving behind any collected loot but saving you from the ship based permadeath of the standard gameplay mode. If players don't want to worry about death or prefer to experiment with loadouts safely, a more forgiving mode is available as well.

The only place the game really falls down is when it comes to repetition. A combination of limited backgrounds and equally limited mission structure makes too many of the 100 or so missions feel all but identical. There is a decent range of enemies and the shooting is genuinely good, but when you do it over and over again in front of the same background everything melds together into an amorphous mass.

DANIEL WILKS PC

OR TRY THIS:

DROX OPERATIVE
SOLDAK ENTERTAINMENT, 2012
▲ Full spaceship RPG
▼ Clunky

JETS 'N' GUNS
RAKE IN GRASS, 2014
▲ Heaps of customisation
▼ Not pretty

STEEL RAIN
POLARITYFLAW, 2015
▲ Bullet hell with crafting
▼ Very busy

VERDICT:

Drifting Lands is a genuinely fun shooter/RPG hybrid brought down by a forgettable story and repetitive structure

7

Steel Division: Normandy '44

It's time to storm those beaches. Again.

DEVELOPER EUGEN SYSTEMS
PUBLISHER PARADOX INTERACTIVE
PRICE US$40
AVAILABLE AT STEAM, GOG
www.steeldivisiongame.com

Eugen Systems first tried its hand at World War 2 with the rather flavourless RUSE, a game that was less about the units on your virtual sand table (RUSE was kind of meta like that), than the tricks you could pull to convince the enemy you were flanking from one direction, when in fact you were attacked from another position entirely.

Steel Division: Normandy '44 eschews those tricks in favour of a more traditional strategy game, albeit while still staying true to the God-like sense of scale of the games – you can zoom out to review an entire theatre, and then zoom in to make sure that one Sherman tank is positioned just so to cover a gap in a hedgerow.

Steel Division is basically the Wargame series redone for the Normandy invasion of June 1944. It's packed with unit detail, down to individual weapon loadouts on the members of a single squad, and detailed modelling of a range of vehicles, from tanks to aircraft and transports.

For each mission you assemble a deck of cards, matching infantry, armour, air-support, artillery, and so on, each to be introduced into a given battle over three phases – so you'll want to start out scouting, then bring in heavier elements and infantry, and then maybe mobile units to exploit any breakthroughs.

Or to plug any gaps in your line if things are going bad.

As much as micro-managing units is possible, it's not totally necessary. Units will generally look after themselves, though you may need to intervene to pull out units that are in danger of becoming suppressed. This mechanic allows units that have been forced to bunker down under fire to be liable to capture, but it's not a quick process – you can track a progress bar pretty easily to see which units need to be moved back, and a simple Fallback order will see them scurrying out of the line of fire. The trick then is to make the most of your units, maximise your firepower against the weakest points of the enemy line, and take ground by maneuver rather than outright assault and attrition.

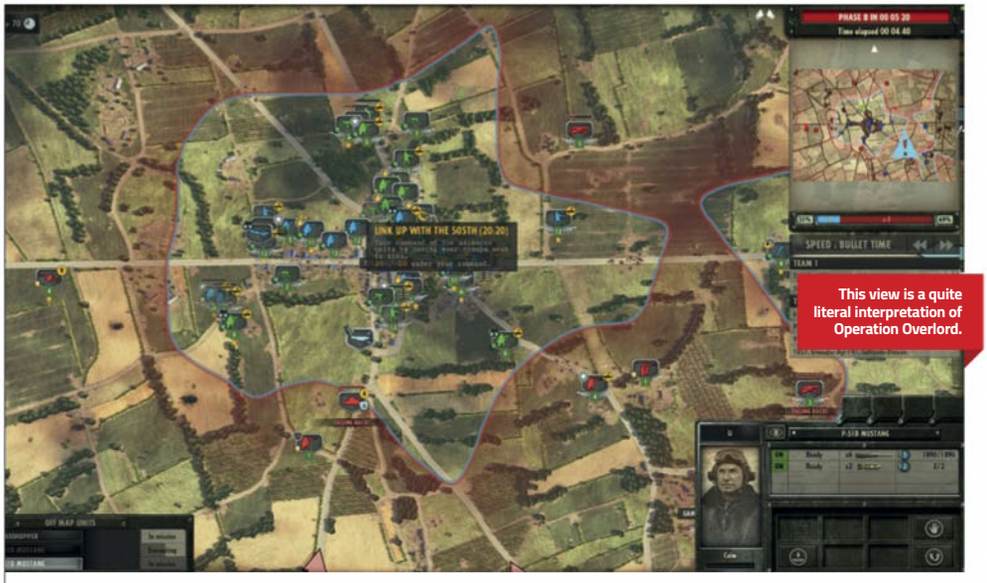
It makes for a slower, more deliberate pace, and when you get all your units working together (scouts spotting for artillery, infantry moving up under covering fire, tanks moving ahead in bounds) it feels remarkably smooth and true to the tactics of the period.

And thanks to some very detailed models, and maps taken from aerial photos from the period, it looks great too.

The game is let down by a very linear campaign, but a robust multiplayer makes up for it, especially in the epic ten-versus-ten co-op battles, where unit cooperation and integration really come into play, and Eugen's included an exhaustive list of units and nationalities that fought in the campaign, so you can constantly explore new builds.

There's a lot of game in this game.

DAVID HOLLINGWORTH PC



This view is a quite literal interpretation of Operation Overlord.

> "zoom in to make sure that one Sherman tank is positioned just so to cover a gap in a hedgerow"

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You can never kill too many Nazis
+ You have a god complex
+ You think you can do better than Field Marshall Montgomery (and you probably can)

OR TRY THIS:

COMPANY OF HEROES: EASTERN FRONT
2010, ARCHAIC ENTERTAINMENT
▲ It's free!
▼ It's cold!

TANK ON TANK DIGITAL
HEXDRAW, 2017
▲ Old-school hex strategy!
▼ Dependent on the RNG

CLOSE COMBAT: GATEWAY TO CAEN
SLITHERINE, 2014
▲ Intensely detailed top-down strategy
▼ Intensely slow-moving AI

VERDICT:

A highly detailed look at a period of history that still manages to fascinate gamers after all these years.

8

Ticket to Earth

Step on a crack, generate a pocket-sized black hole

DEVELOPER ROBOT CIRCUS
PUBLISHER ROBOT CIRCUS
PRICE US$14.99
AVAILABLE AT STEAM (AND IOS)
www.robot-circus.com/games/ticket-to-earth/

Puzzle Quest came out way back in 2007, can you believe that? The jewel-matching RPG that took the simplicity of a basic mobile phone time-waster and layered on impressive RPG depth. Now here's another Australian indie twist on colour-matching. We profiled Ticket to Earth at PAX 2016, then it hit the App Store in March. Now it's out on PC, where it costs about twice as much for some reason.

Anyway, a bunch of characters with different abilities are battling for a seat on the last starship to Earth... more or less. They're definitely doing a story about the doomed colony of New Providence, anyway.

It's widely described as a "match three" puzzler, but really this is a positional tactical RPG that uses a colour-matching mechanic to "charge up" each character. Each turn, the character moves, and the more squares they "match", the more powerful the subsequent attack... or defence... or special ability.

Where TTE succeeds is in the way it layers simple mechanics to create something that is both tactically complex but also straightforward to understand. So many games like this, which offer "100 special moves!" end up with the player staring at lists of "Dagger, Dagger+1, Dagger+2" and it becomes all about knowledge management, rather than actual tactics.

When you're fully immersed in a Ticket to Earth battle, you're thinking in shape, and colour. You're thinking in angle, and distance. And you're thinking how all these things combine to give you advantage over the capable AI - but also how the AI is going to use the same mechanics to try to reach *you*.

Follow the brains to power up braining, or something to that effect

> a positional tactical RPG that uses a colour-matching mechanic to "charge up" each character

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You love matching coloured squares...
+ ...but you need that to matter
+ You don't own an Apple touchscreen device
+ You really want to fly away in a starship

There's a story of course, and characters to care about, but functionally, it adds a natural linear progression that lets the player first come to grips with the basic mechanics, and then tackle things like ranged weapons and area-of-effect later on. Not to mention each character's unique powers.

So, good ideas, good tactics, arguably more fun with a touch interface (and cheaper), but otherwise what's the problem?

The problem is that this is just "Episode 1" of the game. Robot Circus claims 10 hours of content, but mobile players say more like six - in any case, the actual length is immaterial. Tell any audience that this full-price ticket only buys part of the trip to Earth, and they'll get mad.

In some ways the criticism feels unfair: 10 hours of really clever tactical battles for US$15 is decent value. But three months after the iOS version launched, the fans are losing patience.

To play Ticket to Earth is to buy into the hype around this game. It's an unashamed indie darling, queer POC main character and all. It's not just about clever mechanics, it's a solid attempt at telling a story about marginalised people hitting back.

At one Episode, Ticket to Earth is worth the price of admission. Once all four are released, and assuming each brings fresh mechanics to the colourful grid? Then it's an absolute bargain.

ANTHONY FORDHAM PC

OR TRY THIS:

PUZZLEQUEST
2007, INFINITE INTERACTIVE
▲ Match three to kill goblins!
▼ So many goblins. So much matching.

BANNER SAGA
2014, STOIC
▲ Turn-based Viking deaths matter!
▼ Veeeeery slooooow paaaaaaan

CARD HUNTER
2013, BLUE MANCHU
▲ Tabletop metaphor is so meta
▼ Microtransactions. And Gary

VERDICT:

Innovative tactical RPG that rates higher on iOS coz it's cheaper

7

Old Man's Journey

Papa don't preach

DEVELOPER BROKEN RULES
PUBLISHER BROKEN RULES
PRICE $14.99
AVAILABLE AT STEAM
www.oldmansjourney.com

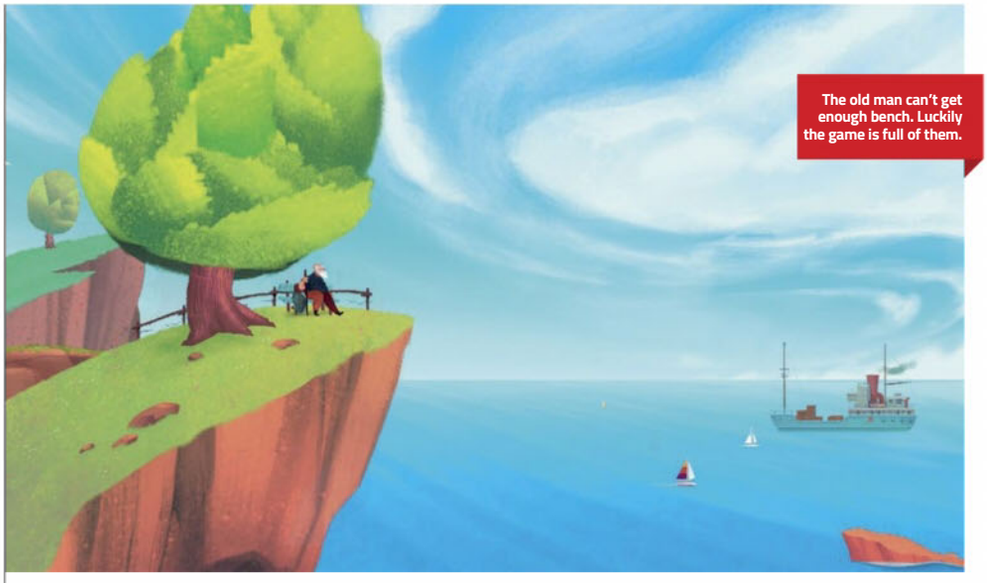
The past ten years or so have seen video game development move through a period of what has come to be known as Dadification. That is to say, from Sean Bean in Fallout 3 to Lee in The Walking Dead, from Red Dead's John Marston to various BioShocks, The Witcher 3, The Last of Us and countless others, there has been a heck of a lot of dads in video games of late.

When I spoke with Rime creative director Raul Rubio a couple of issues ago, he cited the birth of his first child as an inspiration for much of that game's sensibility and thematic exploration. It's easy to imagine that as developers reach a certain age, the games they make might reflect their life experience. The teenage fantasies of space ships, robots, dragons and really, really hot elves might start to recede as serious, adult responsibilities, like being a parent, draw ever nearer.

Old Man's Journey can be seen as the next logical step in the Dadification of games. It's the Video Game Dad taken to the next level, you might say, if you were still obsessed with the aforementioned teen fantasies.

You play as an old man. You can tell he's old because he has a big grey beard and carries a walking stick. His journey, as referenced in the title, is both literal and figurative. With walking stick and rucksack in hand, he sets out for a stroll in the countryside. At the outset his destination is ambiguous, but it's not long before you realise where it all might be heading.

The 2D landscape is composed of numerous layers, each typically representing a hill or a road or some other platform you can traverse. By clicking on a layer you can move it up and down, thus altering the landscape. For example, by dragging the curves of two hills that were previously separated, you can cause them to now touch and the old man can travel between them.



The old man can't get enough bench. Luckily the game is full of them.

> you can tell he's old because he has a big grey beard and carries a walking stick

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You're a dad
+ You like shifts in perspective
+ You gaze at the sea at dusk recalling every mistake you ever made

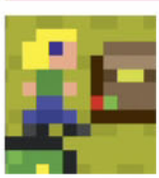
At its core, Old Man's Journey is a puzzle game. In each of the dozen or so locations, most of which span a good half dozen or so screens, your objective is simply to guide him to the end, manipulating the layers of the landscape as you go. What makes it tricky is that you cannot move the layer he is currently on, and so most of the puzzles are derived from having to work around this restriction. Still, it's a light affair, and none of the areas left me stumped for terribly long, even if a few of them do serve up some clever variations on the theme.

What I enjoyed most about Old Man's Journey was its tone. It's a slow paced game – you're an old man, after all, and he really does walk everywhere – that leaves you with plenty of time to dwell in its whimsical art and gently strumming guitar soundtrack. Each area plays like a vignette of a man – a husband, a father, a grandfather - looking back on his life, trawling through memories, for better and worse. The revelations aren't profound, but the mood will strike a chord with anyone who's lived a life and has regrets. Playing this game won't be one of them, though.

DAVID WILDGOOSE PC

OR TRY THIS:

THE GRAVEYARD
TALE OF TALES
2008
▲ An old woman goes for a walk and sits on a bench
▼ That's it, basically



PASSAGE
JASON ROHRER
2007
▲ Really sad
▼ Or really boring, if it doesn't click

SAMOROST 3
AMANITA DESIGN
2016
▲ Click on the pretty pictures
▼ Can feel rather random

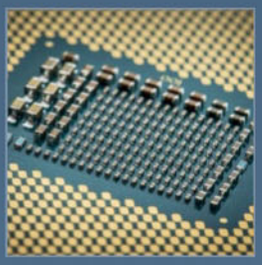
VERDICT:

A brief, gentle puzzle adventure tinged with melancholy.

8

Tech 264

YOUR GUIDE TO PC GAMING HARDWARE



Time Flies

Technology never stops

I've been a technology journo for over 17 years now, and have never been bored. That's the cool thing about tech – there's always something new and interesting just around the corner. Sure, half of these new wonder-products turn out to be duds, but there are also myriad technologies that have changed the way we live.

This edition was written just after I returned from Computex 2017, the world's biggest PC hardware show. And to be frank it was one of the more interesting Computex shows I've been to, all thanks to AMD's Ryzen processor. This has really supercharged the CPU market, with Intel being forced to react swiftly with competing products. You can read more about the new Intel Core-X series later in the mag, but the mere fact that Intel no longer has a monopoly on the CPU market is a wonder in itself. So thank you AMD, for spicing up a stagnant segment.

I was also teased details about AMD's new Vega architecture, which looks set to give Nvidia competition as well. It appears that AMD's change in strategy and staff a few years ago has really worked in our interest.

Sadly VR wasn't quite as prominent as I'd like it to be, with very few innovations on show, outside of a new 210 degree FOV headset from Starbreeze, but this will only be sold to theme parks and IMAX cinemas. It's inevitable this tech will flow down to the consumer level, I just wish it would hurry the heck up.

There were also plenty of duds as well – this year the big flop that I foresee are gaming chairs. I saw at least 30 different gaming chairs on the market, and there's just not a need for these. They're also going to be incredibly hard to ship and stock for retailers, so stick with your good old ergonomic chairs and don't get suckered into a gaming chair.

So yeah, another year has passed, and once again I'm enamoured by all the new goodies that are on the way. Honestly, AMD is really behind the biggest of these, so I'm fighting for this underdog all the way. Monopolies lead to tech stagnation, so if AMD can stick it to Intel and Nvidia, we should see some rather crazy technology leaps over the next few years. And I can't wait to talk about them.

Bennett Ring
Tech Editor

Our Power Award is given to products that are best in class no matter your budget.

Our Smart Buy Award goes to products that balance performance with price tag.

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THE PCPP TESTBENCH

CPU
INTEL I7 3770K
intel.com.au

MOBO
GIGABYTE Z77X-UD3H
gigabyte.com.au

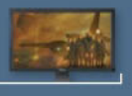
SSD
CORSAIR NEUTRON
corsair.com

RAM
8GB PATRIOT DDR3 2,133MHz
patriotmemory.com

GPU
RADEON HD 7970
amd.com

PSU
CORSAIR AX860I
corsair.com

DISPLAY
DELL U2711
www.dell.com.au



CASE

Cooler Master Cosmos II 25th Anniversary Ed.

Our favourite case makes a comeback

PRICE $449
www.coolermaster.com

When it was first released almost ten years ago, the Cooler Master Cosmos jumped straight to the top of our list of most desirable cases. Sure, it was huge and expensive, but if you wanted a full tower that was as well-built as it was flexible, there was nothing better. In fact, it was so beloved that it remained our most recommended case for several years. It might have taken them a decade, but Cooler Master has now released the next iteration, the Cooler Master Cosmos II 25th Anniversary Edition (the 25th Anniversary refers to the company's age, not the case design).

Unlike the first case, the Cosmos II now comes with dual tempered glass side panels. The company claims they're the first in the world to deliver curved tempered glass, but we saw several other such panels at Computex. They're mounted elegantly on a hinge system – just unlatch them at the rear and they fold open. The rest of the case is built from steel and aluminium, with a beautiful subtle brushed finish to the front. A sliding plate at the top front reveals a series of buttons that control everything from power and reset, to GPU and fan speed controls. Underneath this are four USB 2.0 and twin USB 3.0 ports.

The rest of the design hasn't changed hugely, retaining the large handles that help make this monstrosity a little easier to move around. Blue LED lights are used throughout to show off the interior, which has been divided into three zones: the motherboard mount, PSU shroud and removable drive bays. It's possible to reverse the motherboard mount if you'd prefer.

We can't understate how big this case is. It'll easily handle an E-ATX board, and has 10+1 expansion ports at the rear. There's room for three 5.25" optical drives, 13 3.5" drives or 11 2.5" drives, but you'll have to sacrifice some of these depending on the final drive bay configuration you decide upon.

Cooler Master has also given it a stack of fans, with a single 120mm at the top, a 200mm at the front, a 140mm at the rear and room for three more to cool the hard drives. There's also plenty of room for various radiators, up to a 320mm radiator at the top.

This case obviously isn't for everybody – it's massive, and rather outlandishly styled. However, it's also a darned site cheaper than the original, at just $449, and we're in love. Welcome to our new Beast case. *BENNETT RING* PC

> built from steel and aluminium, with a beautiful subtle brushed finish to the front

- Massive
- Beautiful design
- Twin tempered glass

- Massive
- Looks won't appeal to all

VERDICT:

It's about time Cooler Master delivered a successor to the Cosmos, and what a successor it is.

10

CORE-X: REVENGE UPON RYZEN?

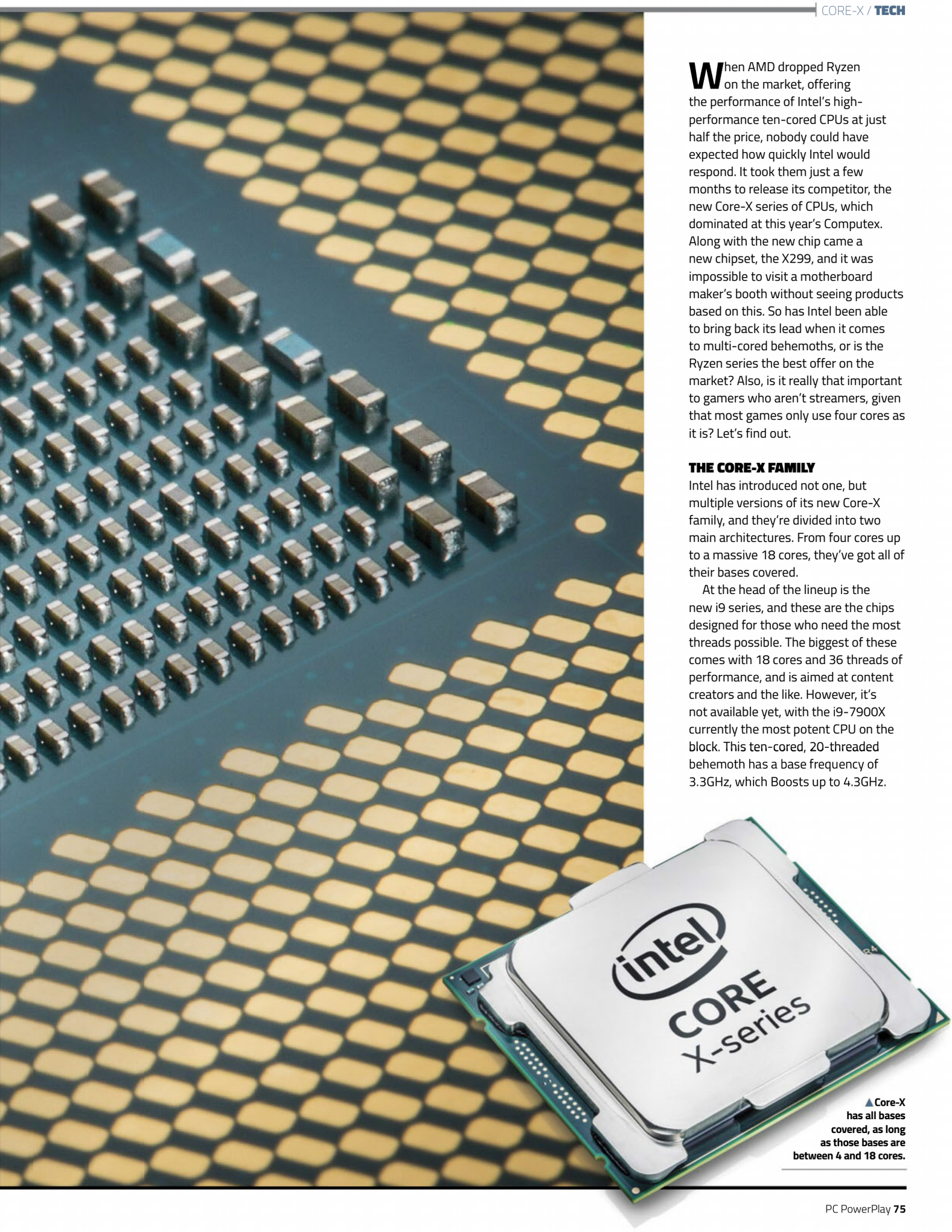
We've finally got our eager hands on Intel's new CPU. **BENNETT RING** crunches the numbers...

When AMD dropped Ryzen on the market, offering the performance of Intel's high-performance ten-cored CPUs at just half the price, nobody could have expected how quickly Intel would respond. It took them just a few months to release its competitor, the new Core-X series of CPUs, which dominated at this year's Computex. Along with the new chip came a new chipset, the X299, and it was impossible to visit a motherboard maker's booth without seeing products based on this. So has Intel been able to bring back its lead when it comes to multi-cored behemoths, or is the Ryzen series the best offer on the market? Also, is it really that important to gamers who aren't streamers, given that most games only use four cores as it is? Let's find out.

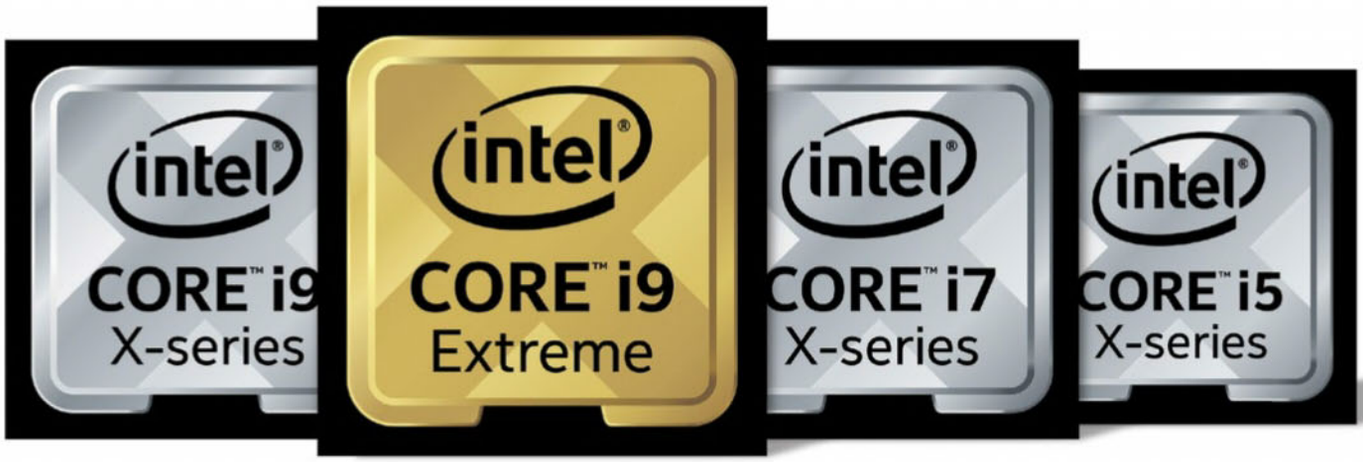
THE CORE-X FAMILY

Intel has introduced not one, but multiple versions of its new Core-X family, and they're divided into two main architectures. From four cores up to a massive 18 cores, they've got all of their bases covered.

At the head of the lineup is the new i9 series, and these are the chips designed for those who need the most threads possible. The biggest of these comes with 18 cores and 36 threads of performance, and is aimed at content creators and the like. However, it's not available yet, with the i9-7900X currently the most potent CPU on the block. This ten-cored, 20-threaded behemoth has a base frequency of 3.3GHz, which Boosts up to 4.3GHz.



▲Core-X has all bases covered, as long as those bases are between 4 and 18 cores.



▲ **Brand logos: the captioner's nightmare.**

Like AMD, Intel has introduced a second level of turbo boost if the thermal conditions are right, called Turbo Boost Max 3.0. In the case of the i9-7900X, this adds another 2GHz to the speed, with a maximum speed of 4.5GHz.

All of these cores means a relatively high TDP, at 140W, and Intel does not supply a cooler with this chip. They recommend water cooling if you want to overclock; air cooling if you do not. This is the only chip currently available with the full 44 PCIe lanes from the CPU, well ahead of AMD's offering. Memory speeds for this CPU are officially rated at DDR4-2666MHz, but we've seen several overclockers going well beyond that speed. It also supports quad memory channels for a maximum of 128GB.

This chip is based on the Skylake-X architecture, which is based on a 14nm manufacturing process. Intel has remained mum about the number of transistors within, though it must be a significant amount. Improvements to Skylake-X include an increase of 256kB L2 cache to each core to a huge 1MB, while the bandwidth between the L1 and L2 caches has been increased to 128 bytes per cycle. Intel claims this has quadrupled the associativity of the cache from four ways in Skylake to 16 in Skylake-X. However, there's a pay-off. The shared-last level cache has dropped from 2.5MB per core in preview architectures down to 1.375MB per core, as Intel felt the extra memory was being wasted by relying on data sharing via L3 caches. As our benchmarks show though, it hasn't hurt performance.

> remember that the X299 is for Intel, and the X399 is for AMD. We think AMD's naming is a little bit dodgy

In the past, Intel used a technology called ring topology to connect the CPU cores, but they've ditched that in favour of a new mesh interconnect technology. This apparently has several benefits, firstly being lower latency and higher bandwidth, yet operates at a lower frequency and voltage.

The new CPUs now rely upon a Socket LGA 2066 design, which means you're going to need to upgrade your motherboard. However, the socket design is the same size as Socket 2011-3, which means your old coolers will still work fine, provided they can handle the 140TDP.

We were supplied with the i9-7900X, but were also given the 'entry-level' Core-X, the i7-7740X, which is effectively a replacement for the i7-7700K, but gives owners the ability to upgrade to stupidly high-cored CPUs in the future. Think of it as the answer to AMD's Ryzen 5 series, which is only six-cored, and quite affordable, but opens up an upgrade path to the Ryzen 7 down the track. Unlike the i9, this is based on the Kaby Lake-X architecture. It still uses the Socket LGA 2066 of the i9, and requires the new chipset, but it's a vastly different offering.

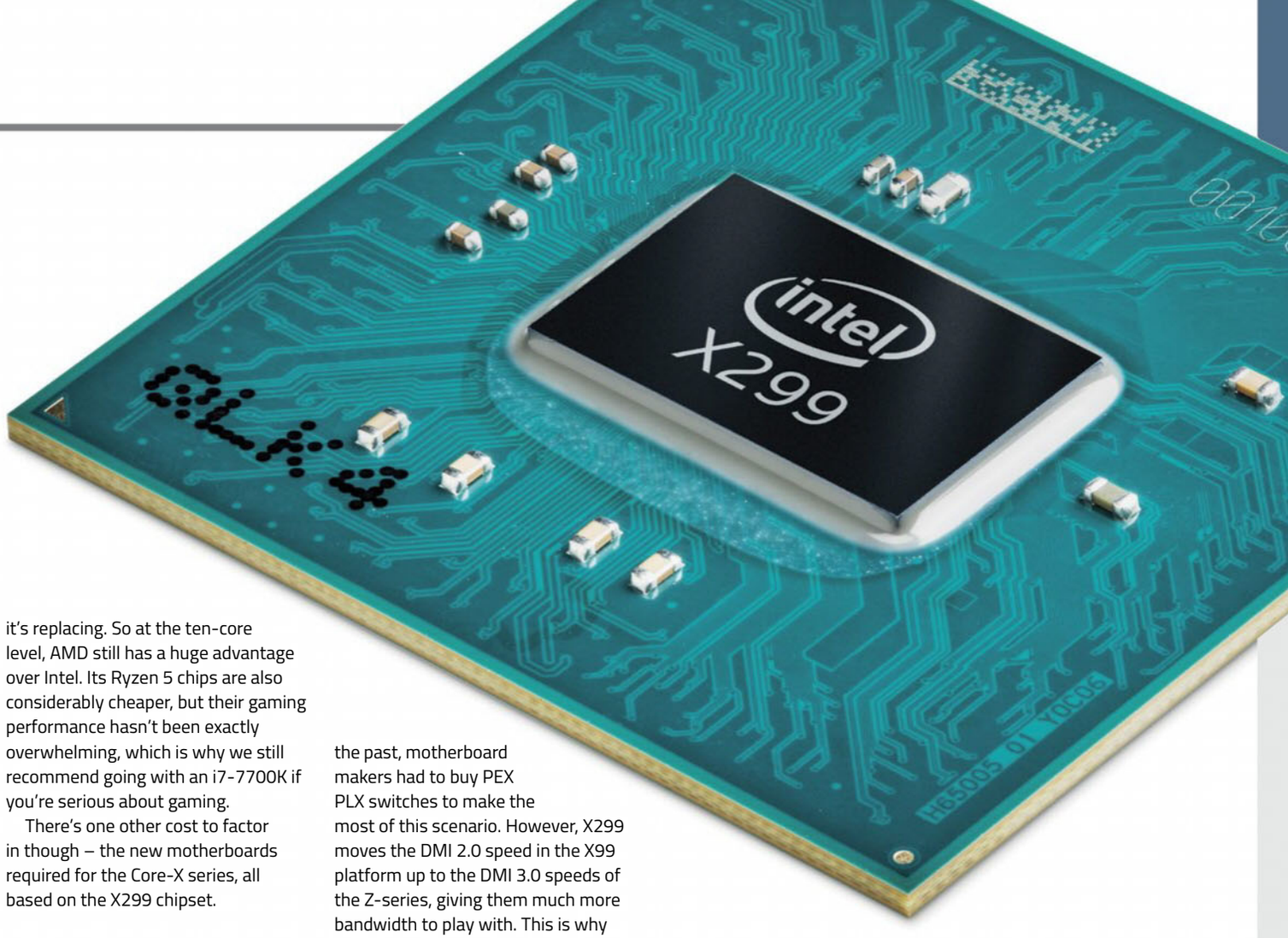
For starters, this is a quad-cored CPU, with Hyper-Thread. It does not support Turbo Boost Max 3.0. It's also had its PCIe lanes dramatically cut back to just 16 PCIe lanes from the CPU; though the chipset delivers an extra 28, but they share a DMI 3.0 connection with the CPU, which means all 28 won't be available. It's also only a dual channel memory board, so if you buy an X299 board with eight memory slots, only half will work. Ditto the PCIe lanes; one or more may not work if you go with a Kaby Lake-X based CPU.

When looking at the specifications of the Kaby Lake X, it strikes us how similar it is to the former Kaby Lake architecture. The main differences are that it must have the LGA 2066 form factor, even though around 1000 of the pins on the Kaby Lake X chip aren't used. Secondly, they're slight faster when it comes to base frequencies. However, the i7-7740X has the exact same Boost frequency of 4.5GHz as the i7-7700K. Finally, the integrated GPU in the i7-7740X has been disabled. In all other regards they seem to be identical, with none of the new mesh interconnect technology or changes to caching. In effect, you're buying a CPU that performs, and is basically, identical to the i7-7700K, just in a new form factor. Oh, you'll also have to pay $30 extra for the privilege.

PRICING

The big surprise about the Ryzen 7 series was its huge price advantage over Intel at the time. Intel's ten-cored i7-6950X was selling for – and is still selling for – around $2600. For AMD to come in with a ten-cored chip that could keep up with it in most tasks for just $680 was an absolute revelation. Throw in cheaper motherboards for the Ryzen, and Intel took a beating when it came to price and performance. So how do its new chips compare?

The new ten-cored i9-7900X is currently retailing in Australia for $1,480, just over half the price of its predecessor, but still twice the price of the Ryzen 7 1800X. As for the i7-7740X, this is now retailing for $519, which puts it on par with the i7-7700K



▲ **Chips with a brand logo on it: the captioner's new nightmare.**

it's replacing. So at the ten-core level, AMD still has a huge advantage over Intel. Its Ryzen 5 chips are also considerably cheaper, but their gaming performance hasn't been exactly overwhelming, which is why we still recommend going with an i7-7700K if you're serious about gaming.

There's one other cost to factor in though – the new motherboards required for the Core-X series, all based on the X299 chipset.

THE X299

Please, please, please remember that the X299 is for Intel, and the X399 is for AMD. We think AMD's naming practices here are a little bit dodgy, and are sure there will be many customers who end up buying the wrong chipset. Enough about that though – what does the new X299 deliver?

Formally codenamed as Basin Falls, the X299 chipset first and foremost has the LGA 2066 socket required for every single new Core-X processor. Despite some of these new Core-X chips seeming to be identical to their predecessor (cough i7-7740X), Intel has ensured that the Core-X chips will only fit within this socket.

In the past, Intel's Z-series of chipsets have used a High Speed IO (HSIO) design that makes the chipset act like one large PCIe switch. The DMI 3.0 link from the CPU, which is basically a PCIe 3.0 x 4 link, the chipset could support up to 24 lanes of PCIe 3.0 from various configurations. This meant motherboard makers could go straight to the chipset instead of the CPU for its PCIe lanes, used for USB, M.2, Ethernet and the like.

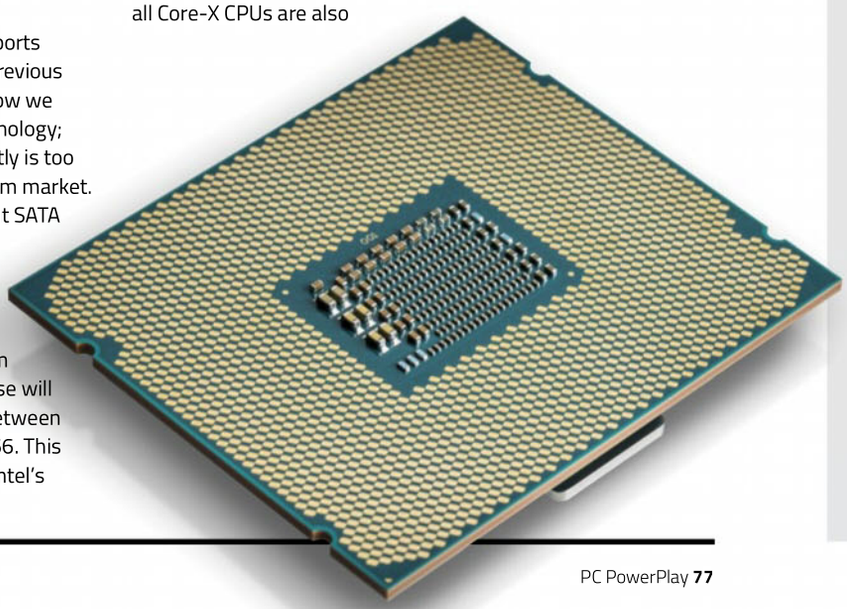
X299 now mirrors this concept, bringing HSIO to the new chipset. In the past, motherboard makers had to buy PEX PLX switches to make the most of this scenario. However, X299 moves the DMI 2.0 speed in the X99 platform up to the DMI 3.0 speeds of the Z-series, giving them much more bandwidth to play with. This is why the i9-7900X now has 44 lanes of PCIe 3.0 available to it, on top what the chipset offers, whereas the X99 only had eight PCIe 2.0 lanes, separate to the 40 lanes direct to the graphics lanes. However, the number of lanes supported is reliant upon the CPU you buy, with either 16, 28 or 44 PCIe lanes depending on the Core-X CPU installed. Once again, this will end up with consumers having to figure out just how many devices they can install on their system before buying it, looking at confusing tables in motherboard manuals to see which features are disabled when others are in use.

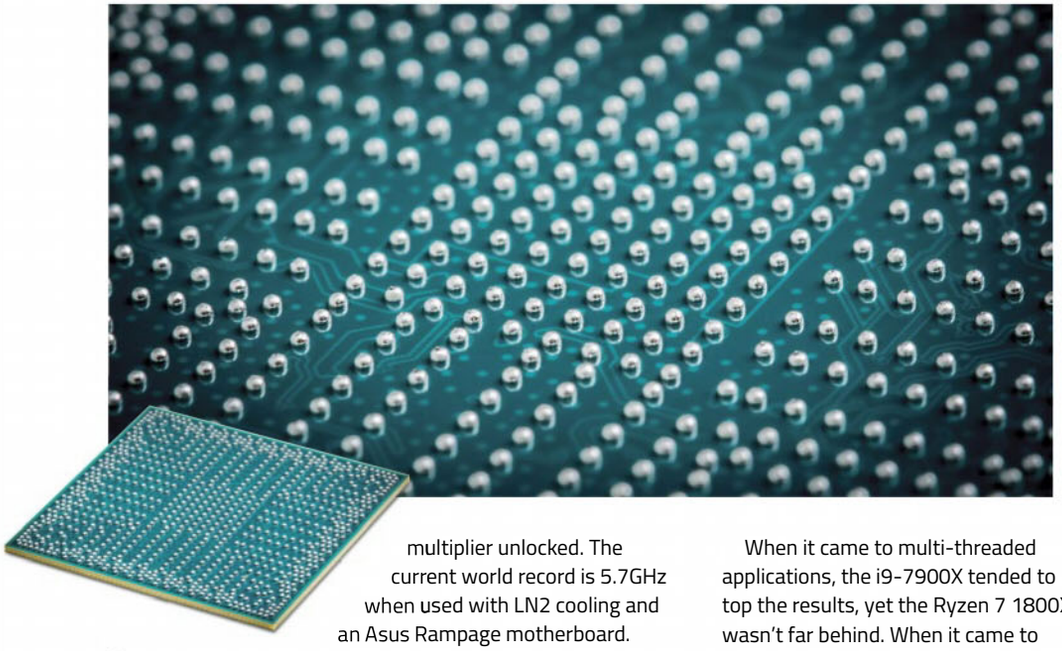
Obviously X299 also supports Optane, but if you've read previous issues of PCPP you know how we feel about this caching technology; it holds promise, but currently is too immature for the mainstream market. X299 natively supports eight SATA 3.0 ports and up to 10 USB 3.0 ports.

X299 supports quad-memory lanes, with up to eight DIMMS for a maximum of 128GB. The speed of these will depend on the processor, between DDR4-2400 and DDR4-2666. This new chipset also supports Intel's VROC (Virtual Raid on CPU), which supports up to 20 devices in a bootable raid partition. However, to enable this feature, you'll need to buy an extra key that plugs into the board, which looks to us just like a header. To be frank, we feel this technology should be offered free of charge, as it's built into every X299 board and Core-X CPU.

TWEAK IT HARD

Overclockers will appreciate the fact that the X299 brings both multiplier and base clock frequency adjustments to the table. From what we can tell, all Core-X CPUs are also





▲ **Abstract modern art: the captioner's final nightmare.**

multiplier unlocked. The current world record is 5.7GHz when used with LN2 cooling and an Asus Rampage motherboard. We've also noticed that on our test motherboard, the MSI X299 Carbon Pro Gaming AC, there's an additional 4-pin power connector for the CPU, allowing extra voltage to the CPU, though we didn't have a PSU compatible with this configuration.

TESTING TIMES

We recently conducted extensive testing on the Ryzen series of processors, so mirrored these exact conditions for our Core-X testing, saving us a week of testing (we only received Core-X compatible coolers two days before going to print). This means we used the same SSDs, Ballistic memory, though had to upgrade the cooler to Corsair's H105 Hydro. We did not update the Nvidia drivers on our Aorus GeForce GTX 1080 OC, as these may have skewed the results.

When it came to multi-threaded applications, the i9-7900X tended to top the results, yet the Ryzen 7 1800X wasn't far behind. When it came to tests that relied more upon single-threaded strength, the Intel chips tended to perform better. Though they were beaten by the i7-7700K several times.

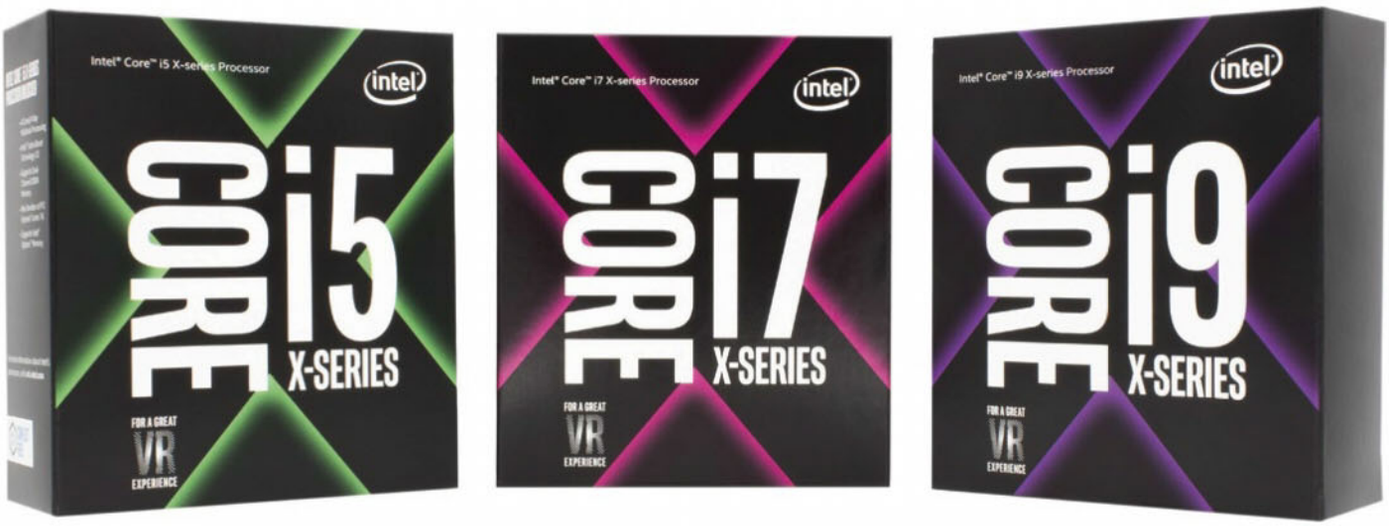
Looking at the gaming results, we were extremely surprised to see the i9-7900X take out the win in every single test. In the past, Intel's ten-cored chips haven't done well in these tests, so to see them take out the top spot was quite remarkable. On the other hand, in many of these gaming tests, the i7-7700K came a fraction of the way behind, and it's only 30% of the cost of the i9-7900X.

THE CORE-X QUESTION

It's exciting times in the world of CPUs, especially if you're looking for workstation performance. AMD's Ryzen 7 performed even better than everybody expected, and we can only imagine how it's upcoming 16-core, 32-thread Threadripper CPU will shake up the market. Intel has been forced to play its hand early, bringing forward the launch of several products, and this is both good and bad for the market. The Skylake-X architecture seems to be a major update to prior designs, and has brought some great performance gains to the table. Yet it's still double the price of a Ryzen 7 1800X, and the performance difference in many apps doesn't go anywhere near gratifying that price increase. Throw in the increased price of X299 boards when compared to Ryzen's more affordable boards, and we think that Ryzen 7 is still the price/performance winner. If price isn't a consideration, then the Intel chip is for you.

Onto the i7-7740X chip then. This merely seems to be a stop-gap measure to throw something into the market that mainstream gamers can afford, yet offers very few benefits over the i7-7700K. Add the additional cost of an X299 board, which are starting around the $450 price mark, and it's just not worth upgrading for. Thankfully we have Intel's Coffee Lake architecture due in the new future, and with the added heat AMD has given Intel, here's hoping Intel pulls its finger out and delivers more than the 7% performance improvements we've grown accustomed to over the last few years.

Either way, it's good news for consumers – competition can lead to lower prices and better products, and AMD has really stepped up to the plate this year. Intel now has real competition on its hands, so we can look forward to the CPU wars heating up over the next year. PC



Core-X Series Benchmarks

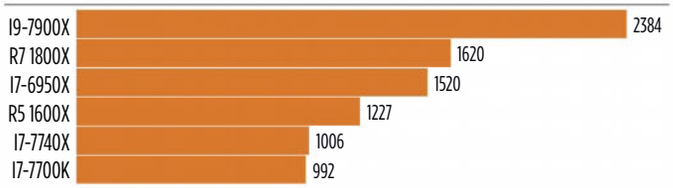
NOTE: I7 6950X HAD TWO CORES DISABLED, DOWN FROM TEN TO EIGHT, TO REPLICATE THE 6900K

Cinebench R15 Single Thread

HIGHER IS BETTER

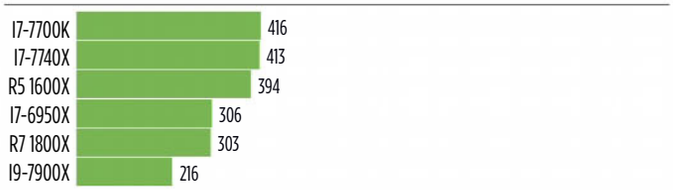
Cinebench R15 MULTIThread

HIGHER IS BETTER



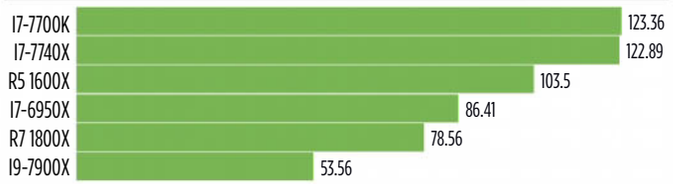
HandBrake nightly build: 1.1GB 4K Video to Matroska H.265 MKV 720p30

SCORE TIME (SECONDS - LOWER IS BETTER)



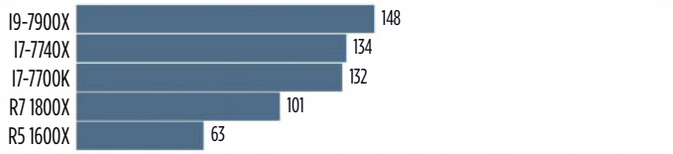
POV-RAY: Benchmark scene

ELAPSED TIME (SECONDS) - LOWER IS BETTER



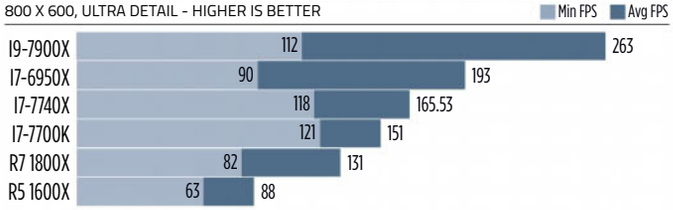
TOTAL WAR - WARHAMMER

CUSTOM SETTINGS, 1080P, HIGHER IS BETTER — Avg FPS



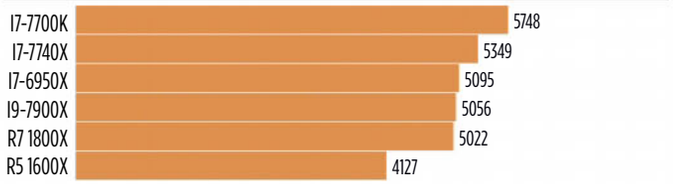
GRID AUTOSPORT

800 X 600, ULTRA DETAIL - HIGHER IS BETTER — Min FPS — Avg FPS



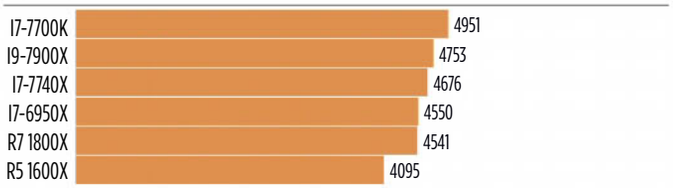
PCMark 8 Home Open CL Accelerated

HIGHER IS BETTER



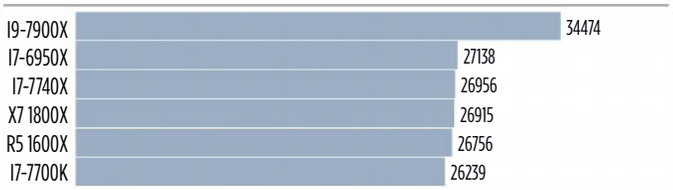
PCMark 8 Home Non-accelerated Conventional

HIGHER IS BETTER



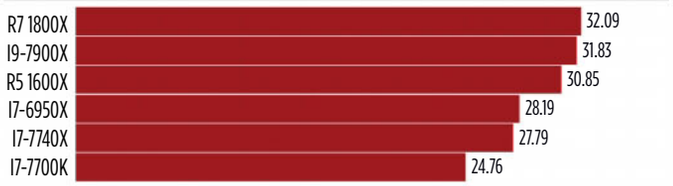
7-Zip Multithreaded file compression

192MB DICTIONARY SIZE, HIGHER IS BETTER



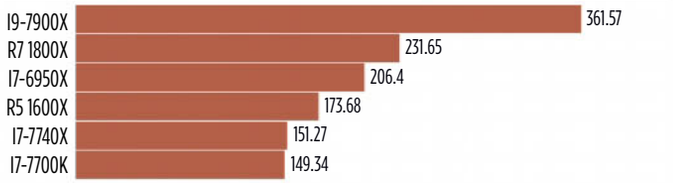
SiSoft Sandra: Memory Bandwidth

AGGREGATE (GB/SEC - HIGHER IS BETTER)



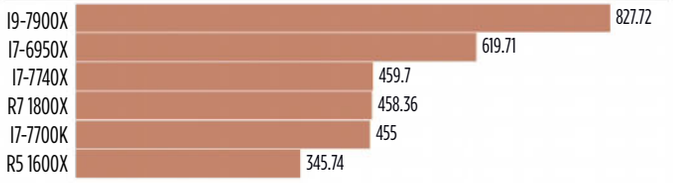
SiSoft Sandra: Processor Arithmetic

AGGREGATE NATIVE PERFORMANCE GOPS (HIGHER IS BETTER)



SiSoft Sandra: Processor Multimedia

AGGREGATE MULTI-MEDIA NATIVE PERFORMANCE (MPIX/S - HIGHER IS BETTER)



Aorus X5 v7 Benchmarks

Min FPS Avg FPS Firestrike Score Extreme

RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER

GEOTHERMAL VALLEY (ULTRA, 1080P, PUREHAIR DISABLED)

X5 v7 66 98

TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER

ULTRA DETAIL, 1080P

X5 v7 95 105

GHOST RECON: WILDLANDS

ULTRA DETAIL, 1080P

X5 v7 42 52

3DMARK Firestrike & Extreme

X5 v7 7153 13753

LAPTOP

Gigabyte Aorus X5 v7

Gigabyte enhances an old product yet again

PRICE $3599
www.gigabyte.com.au

When you're onto a good thing, stick to it. That seems to be the motto at Gigabyte's laptop division, as they're constantly releasing revisions of laptops that have been around for several years. The latest is the seventh iteration of the X5, in the form of the X5 v7, and it's quite the beast.

Gigabyte has dubbed this the world's fastest 15.6-inch laptop, and the specs go quite a way to prove as much. But before we delve into that, let's look at what you're going to have fit into your backpack. Thanks to the larger screen, it's rather heavy, but Gigabyte doesn't have an official product page, and didn't supply us with any specs, so it's hard to be precise. We'd approximate a weight of 2.5kg or so, so it's not exactly upwardly mobile.

We experienced a couple of weird quirks with our review sample. Firstly, we always update to the latest drivers when testing a laptop. While the Windows Update worked fine, when we tried to update the Nvidia drivers, we kept getting an error message saying "This graphics driver could not find compatible graphics hardware." As a result, we had to test with the factory installed drivers, Nvidia's 382.30 drivers. Secondly, when running the 3DMark benchmarks, both tests ran in small windows, despite being set to fullscreen mode. Even Alt+Enter didn't solve the issue, so we'd take these results with a grain of salt.

Onto the machine itself. Our review version came with a 4K display, though only a 1080p option will be available in Australia. It's G-Sync enabled, though it only has a 60Hz refresh rate according to

the Nvidia control panel. Again though, we can't be sure that's the utmost refresh rate due to the driver issues and lack of specifications from Gigabyte.

Powering it all is Intel's i7-7820HK CPU, which boosts from a base speed of 2.9GHz up to 3.9GHz. This is paired with 16GB of DDR4-2400MHz memory, but the real power comes from the Nvidia GeForce GTX 1070. Unfortunately it doesn't appear that Gigabyte has employed the new Max-Q thermal solution, as this is one loud sucker. During our harshest tests, fan noise was a rather rowdy 54dB, making it much louder than the new laptops employing Max-Q. Storage is very generous, with a 256GB NVMe M.2 SSD and 1TB mechanical hard drive.

> "it mightn't be the most portable laptop on the market, but it certainly is fast"

It mightn't be the most portable laptop on the market, but it certainly is fast. We only wish it employed Nvidia's new Max-Q tech to keep it a little quieter, which will be rolling out in coming months. It's also not exactly cheap, but if you want performance of this level, you've got to be willing to fork out for it. *BENNETT RING* PC

- Impressive internal specs
- Simple
- Subtle design

- A few early bugs
- Pricey
- Lacks Max-Q

VERDICT:

While this may well be the world's fastest 15.6-inch system, we'd recommend holding off for the Max-Q notebooks that are on the horizon.

8

RGB

Corsair LINK RGB kit

Let it bling

PRICE CORSAIR LIGHTING NODE PRO RGB: $78 • CORSAIR HD120 RGB LED, 3X120MM HIGH PERFORMANCE RGB LED PWM FANS: $120 • CORSAIR COMMANDER PRO: $109
www.corsair.com

We're doing this review a little differently than usual. Rather than review a single RGB product, we're reviewing Corsair's RGB ecosystem. So it's really three products in one, and our goal is to see if buying all of them together is worth the rather high price.

The first of the three products is a triple pack of HD120 LED fans. Each has 12 RGB LEDs mounted in the frame, and there's a button on each to control their mode or colour. With a rated maximum air flow of 54.4CFM, it's not quite as powerful as Thermaltake's Riing Plus 14, which has a flow of 63.19 CFM, even while Thermaltake claims its fans are quieter, at 27.2dB-A, versus the maximum of 30dBa for the Corsair fans.

Next in the ecosystem is the Lighting Node Pro. This consists of four RGB LED strips, but each light is independently controlled, so you don't need to set the entire strip to simultaneous colours. For example, you can have one light on the strip flash white while another is red. This feature appears to be unique to Corsair, but we can expect it to start to become the norm if RGB history is any indication. Thermaltake also illustrates similar functionality on its Thermaltake Lumi Color 256C RGB Magnetic LED Strip Control Pack, yet its LUMI Colour LED Strip doesn't seem to support this. The four Corsair light strips come with a USB 2.0 hub for control, but there's a better solution that will integrate all of your Corsair items under its Link software.

This is the final piece of the pie, the Corsair Commander Pro. This compact box supports up to six fan connections, four temperature probe inputs, twin RGB LED channels, and additional USB devices, as it only requires a single interior USB header but comes with two of its own. It's small enough to tuck away behind your motherboard, and comes with enough cable extensions that you should be able to reach all of your RGB devices.

One highlight of Corsair's ecosystem is the excellent LINK software, which has one of the simplest interfaces we've seen. It also works with MSI's Mystic and Asus' Aurus motherboard RGB lighting. However, we think it's a little overpriced when compared to the likes of Thermaltake, which offers marginally better performance, the same feature set, but a cheaper price point. *BENNETT RING* PC

> "for example, you can have one light on the strip flash white while another is red"

- Easy to setup
- Excellent software

- Lower fan flow
- More expensive

VERDICT:

Currently we favour Thermaltake's RGB solution over the Corsair LINK, but it's a mighty close race.

7

Galax GTX 1070 EXOC-SNPR Benchmarks

Min FPS Avg FPS Overall Avg Firestrike Score Extreme

RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER

GEOTHERMAL VALLEY (HIGHEST DETAIL, 1080P, PUREHAIR DISABLED)

GTX 1070 EXOC-SNPR: 55 / 90 / 114

TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER

ULTRA DETAIL, 3840 X 2160

GTX 1070 EXOC-SNPR: 94 / 105

GHOST RECON: WILDLANDS

ULTRA DETAIL, 1080P

GTX 1070 EXOC-SNPR: 43 / 53

3DMARK Firestrike & Extreme

1920 X 1080 ▪ 2560 X 1440

GTX 1070 EXOC-SNPR: 7998 / 15534

PC PowerPlay SMART BUY

LAPTOP

Galax GeForce GTX 1070 EXOC-SNPR White

Rock solid build quality and value

PRICE $575
www.galax.com

Once associated with budget products for those scraping the bottom of their bank accounts, Galax has successfully morphed into a brand that is now associated with higher quality products. They've done so without breaking the bank, delivering innovative features and top-tier performance at a very reasonable price.

This graphics card is one such example. The price is extremely competitive, one of the most affordable on the market in fact, yet Galax hasn't scrimped on the quality. The fact that it has a beautiful white finish will be enough to get many people interested, but Galax has given it more than just a mere paint job.

A 5+2 (five for core, two for memory), which is a generous boost over the default five phase power found in the default Nvidia design. Feeding this is a single six-pin plus single eight-pin power connector, and Galax recommends a minimum PSU of 500W due to the 150W TDP of this card. Everything is cooled by two huge 100mm fans, which measured a mere 46dB under load during our testing. An aluminium back plate keeps everything from sagging, but Galax warns that this could be an issue mounting it; owners will need to ensure there's a gap of 4mm or more between the PCIe slot and RAM or I/O heatsinks. This same backplate is where Galax houses the RGB lighting, but in comparison to other cards, the RGB solution is relatively basic.

As expected, a factory overclock is in place, with the top speed of 1784MHz being a decent boost over the 1683MHz of the default Nvidia GTX 1070. However, we saw speeds approaching 2GHz during our benchmarking, delivering performance almost on par with a GTX 1080. Not too shabby. This card comes with the usual 1070 output options, being a single DVI-D, Single HDMI 2.0a and three DisplayPort 1.4 outputs.

Our benchmarks show that the GTX 1070 powering this card is more than capable of most of today's triple A games, though it's aimed at the 1080p crowd. There are still games that can challenge it even at 1080p though, with the likes of Ghost Recon Wildlands hitting lows of 43fps with everything maxed out, which isn't exactly a smooth experience (unless you've also got a G-Synch display).

> "one of the most affordable on the market, yet Galax hasn't scrimped on quality"

But at this price you can't expect the world; yet Galax has over delivered considering just how cheap this card is. They could easily have gone with a boring stock design but instead added better power and a sexy paint job, all while making it one of the most affordable GeForce GTX 1070s on the block. *BENNETT RING* PC

- Great Value
- Extra power phases
- Cool white paint job

- Basic RGB lighting
- Not the highest factory overclock

VERDICT:

If you want a very affordable GTX 1070 that is still high quality, Galax has you covered.

9

TABLET

Microsoft Surface Pro (2017)

Beast-ish

PRICE $3299
www.microsoft.com

Looking at the trajectory Microsoft's ubertablet has taken since the first Surface hit the market in 2012, it's certainly reasonable to think that, one day, it will be capable of doing anything a gamer could possibly want.

With this, the latest and most expensive Surface Pro yet, that day has not yet arrived. Iris Plus 640 is an excellent onboard GPU, and it can run your GOG library and your indie collections no problem. But coupled with the Surface's 2736x1824 display, this GPU still can't run the latest stuff. But perhaps you expected that.

Perhaps as little as 15 years from now, every PC will be a shiny slab of pure computronium that can fling 8K graphics to whatever smart surface you've had sprayed on your wall. But for now, the Surface Pro is a perfect demonstration of how GPU tech has advanced... differently... to the rest of a PC.

Because apart from graphics, the i7-7660U Surface that Microsoft provided is an absolute beast. It's less than a centimetre thick (including the stand), but it runs a CPU that can boost to 4.0GHz, it has 16GB of RAM, and a 512GB PCIe NVMe SSD. Solder all that to a custom motherboard and you get a lot of grunt.

Of course, you have to pay a lot of money for this. Without the $199 Type Cover, the i7 Surface Pro costs $3299. That hurts.

Without a do-anything GPU, not buying an i7 Surface Pro is a fairly easy choice. But if you need a portable machine for, well, whatever, then the $1600 i5 version with 128GB of storage is very tempting.

Also Microsoft, time to get with the future and add some USB-C ports, yeah? *ANTHONY FORDHAM* PC

- Essentially perfect build-quality
- Serious desktop power
- Very quiet fan

- GPU lags
- Brain-melting price
- Keyboard add-on

VERDICT:

An uber-machine for the non-gamer, but at a necessarily uber-expensive price.

8

FURNITURE

Zen Space Sit+Stand Desk

Ironically avoid death with an electrified work surface!

PRICE $1200
www.zenspacedesks.com.au

Why does the dedicated gaming zone so often neglect the desk? Why is the slice of artificial horizontality that is absolutely key to your gaming enjoyment, so rarely given proper consideration?

If you like a quality desk, then finding one to suit a gaming setup can be frustrating. Many's an Ikea special that has become bowed and sagging from a decade of holding up monitor, tower and more.

Zen Space got into desks to do office fit-outs. And because converting a desk from sit to stand with a crank is a pain, Zen Space built a couple of high-torque electric motors into the legs, and added a control panel. Now, at the touch of a button, the desktop will rise to a preset position.

The Professional - the model we tested - has four memory settings and can rise up to 1.27m. It can also drop to a positively tea-house 62cm for those days where you want to beanbag it.

Thanks to hefty steel construction of the legs, the desk can support 120kg, and it can be specced with an awesome cable management system - which will change your life, take it from us.

This desk was designed for corporates, but Zen Space is working on a more specific gaming range, so check the website for progress.

At $1200, this is obviously a premium product, but it should also last for decades. And anyway, standing to play Overwatch might even give you an edge - who can put a price on that? *ANTHONY FORDHAM* PC

- Easy to assemble
- Excellent build quality
- Built tough for years of punishment

- Very expensive
- Cable management costs extra

VERDICT:

A serious investment, but a good one against future back pain. Plus it looks cool.

9

INPUT

Corsair K68

A keyboard you can literally drool over

PRICE $159
www.corsair.com

The new K68 looks a lot like the budget priced Corsair Strafe keyboard but costs around $50 more. From typing on it you wouldn't really notice the difference – both feature real Cherry MX switches, a single colour backlight and integrated media controls. It's full sized and comes with a simple but comfortable wrist rest. There is no software needed for setup, so it's a simple plug and play affair. The lighting design can be customised with downloadable drivers but given that red is the only lighting colour available it's really much of a muchness. Our review sample features Cherry Red switches and they feel like you would expect – pleasantly mechanical but without any tactile bump or click. It feels good to type and game on.

What really differentiates the K68 from the cheaper Strafe or more expensive RGB options available from Corsair, isn't the choice of lighting or switch. It's the fact that the keyboard is spill and crumb resistant. There can't be many people who haven't eaten over their keyboard at some stage or managed to spill a drink all over their desk, necessitating a serious clean and, in many cases, a new keyboard. The K68 looks to relieve some of that problem. It's not fully waterproof as the keyboard uses an electrical connection to register a keystroke, but for spills it works nicely, standing up to small amounts of liquid without a care. I managed to spill some of my tea on the K68 in the middle of writing this. Let's just pretend I was being thorough, not clumsy.

DANIEL WILKS PC

- Well made
- Splash proof
- Feels good

- Wrist rest is a little flimsy

VERDICT:

A good, fairly cheap mechanical keyboard with a bit of extra peace of mind.

8

INPUT

Corsair Glaive

The right stuff

PRICE $109
www.corsair.com

Gaming mice are a dime a dozen, making it difficult for a new mouse to stand out from the crowd without simply resorting to lots of RGBs and the biggest number DPI achievable by modern science. The Corsair Glaive does tick these two boxes – it has programmable RGB lighting and a 16,000DPI optical sensor (a PMW3367) – but what really makes it stand out from the pack is how comfortable and usable the mouse is. The basic shape is very comfortable to begin with and the matte surface feels nice and cool to the touch, but when you factor in the three interchangeable thumb rests it becomes one of the most comfortable mice we've used in ages.

As with most new gaming mice, the optical sensor is pure overkill for all but the rarest of gamers, but it is very good, offering extremely fast and accurate performance. The DPI is customisable by units of one so you can really home in on the settings you want through five levels of sensitivity, and the polling rate is basically fast enough for any surface. The six buttons are fully programmable and feature Omron switches. The two thumb buttons are well placed and comfortable to use and the scroll wheel is nicely textured and firm. At 112g, the Glaive isn't the lightest mouse around, but for its size and solidity, it definitely isn't heavy. The only real downside is the fact that the Glaive is made for righties only. If you're of the sinister persuasion then you're out of luck.

TAVISH FORREST PC

- Extremely comfortable
- Great sensor
- Fast

- For righties only

VERDICT:

An excellent, fast and comfortable mouse aimed directly at right handed gamers.

9

INPUT

James Donkey 007 Gaming Mouse

Greenfinger

PRICE $80
www.jamesdonkey.com

We love Gearbest. It's a shop chock full of wonderful, terrible products. Some are genuinely good. Others are so bad that you can't believe anyone ever thought of making them, let alone tried to find a market. In one of our most recent trawls through the bowels of Gearbest we came upon something we couldn't pass up, the James Donkey 007 gaming mouse. For the name alone we had to have one, no matter how terrible. We were also curious to see the mouse because it sells for a damn sight more money than most of the other Chinese gaming mice in the store. To our surprise, we dig it, with one major caveat.

The 007 is a modular mouse. There are two bases, three options for each side and three different palm rests, making for 54 possible permutations. As such it's quite easy to make the mouse quite comfortable. Under the hood is a decent if unspectacular Avago 9800 laser sensor that offers up to 8200DPI, the left and right buttons use Omron switches. When you change DPI settings a small speaker in the palm rest plays a tinny rendition of a F1 car revving its engine and taking off. What's not to love about that? For the most part the James Donkey 007 performs quite well and is good and comfortable, but unfortunately there is one major problem with it. The chassis is made of plastic so slick that it feels like it is covered in oil. That's not a good thing. *DANIEL WILKS* PC

- James Donkey!
- Supremely modular
- Car noise!

- Horribly slick

VERDICT:

If it were matte, we'd genuinely love the James Donkey 007 rather than just like it.

7

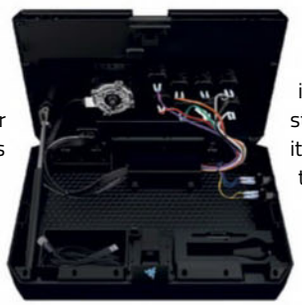
INPUT

Razer Panthera

Heavy punch

PRICE $349.95
www.razerzone.com/au-en

We just got one of these in the office to help us with reviews of Tekken 7, Injustice 2, Blazblue: Crazy Subtitle and a few other fighting games and it's a revelation. Fight sticks are definitely niche products catering to a dedicated market, but if you're a fan of fighting games, a stick is all but a must, and having one that works equally well over console and PC is even better. The Panthera is technically a PS4 fight stick, but it works perfectly on PC without drivers. Not only does the Panthera use genuine Sanwa parts (if you're unfamiliar, think of Sanwa as the Omron or Cherry of the arcade parts world), making it feel extremely accurate, the stick is also beautifully built, giving easy access to the innards is you want to switch out buttons or tweak performance.



The inside of the chassis also has space to hold the cables if you're taking your stick on the road, as well as a replacement bat top joystick if you prefer that style over the ball top. The inside surface of the case has a honeycomb structure for screw mounting, making it supremely moddable. While hollow, the base is hefty enough to be stable on your lap. When it comes to performance, the Panthera feels great. There is little to no input lag and everything feels tight and stable, no matter how wild you get throwing fireballs or clutch back fours. It's a bit of a bummer that you can't change the art on the top panel, but that's ultimately unimportant. *DANIEL WILKS* PC

- Sanwa parts
- Easy access
- Plug and play

- Expensive

VERDICT:

Beautifully built with great moddability and usability. What's not to like?

9

COMPUTEX 2017 TECH TRENDS

BENNETT RING took time out from motion sim VR to assess the rest of the show

With a sweaty crew of four Next Media employees just returning from the world's largest PC hardware show, Computex 2017, we've now got a pretty good grasp on what to expect for the rest of the year, and a taste of the year to come. It was four days of non-stop tech, sweat and sore feet, but it was also one of the best shows in recent years, thanks to the recent release of AMD's Ryzen, which certainly kicked one company into gear. Let's take a look at the key things that blew our minds at this year's show.

▲ **Bennett Ring, in heaven**

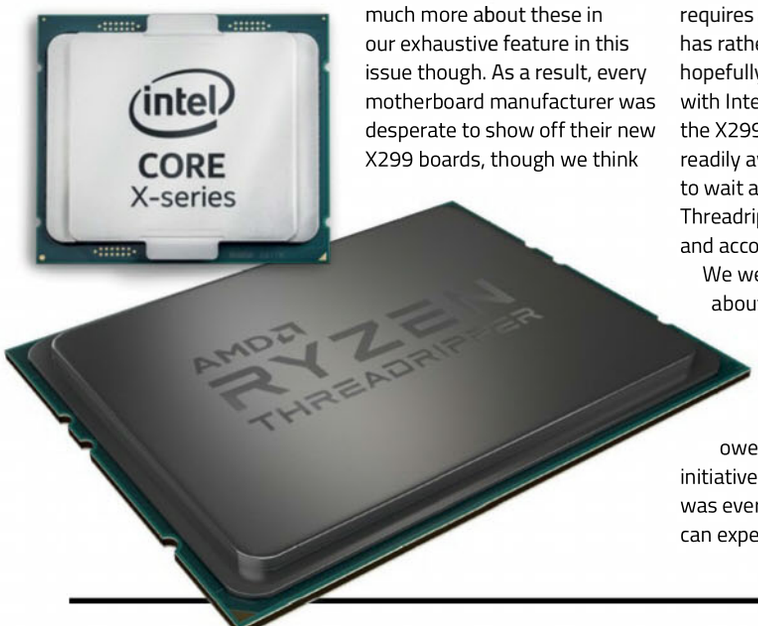
INTEL CORE-X CPU

Thank you to AMD for lighting a fire under Intel's butt. You can read our full Core-X feature in this issue, but Intel's response was definitely one of the huge themes of the show. Not only did they reveal their Core-X CPUs, nine or so in total, which are about half the price of their prior 10-core CPUs, they also unveiled the accompanying chipset, the X299. You can read much more about these in our exhaustive feature in this issue though. As a result, every motherboard manufacturer was desperate to show off their new X299 boards, though we think it's overkill for mainstream gamers.

AMD's reply was to rip out more threads in its CPUs, which they've just happened to call the Threadripper. This monstrosity is about the size of the palm of an adult hand, and features a rather insane 16 cores, with two threads per core. It too requires a new chipset, which AMD has rather sneakily called the X399 – hopefully consumers don't confuse it with Intel's new X299 chipset. While the X299 and Core-X products are readily available, consumers will have to wait a few more months for the Threadripper (Coolest. Name. Ever.) and accompanying motherboards.

We were desperate on information about the Vega GPU architecture, but sadly were only informed that we'd here more about it at Siggraph Damn you AMD, but still, we owe it to you for restarting the initiative in the CPU battles. Ryzen was everywhere to be seen, and we can expect it to also show up in the new Ryzen Mobile APU, which uses Zen cores from the Ryzen, and Vega Compute Units from the Vega GPU. It's looking to be a killer product, and the likes of Dell, Lenovo and Acer were all there to show off their upcoming notebook prototypes.

▼ **The Intel-AMD contest is going to be a lot hotter this year.**



MOTION RIGS

While VR was nowhere near as popular this year as last, two peripherals designed to work with it simply blew our minds. The first was MSI's Vibrating VR chair; it's basically a US$9k racing rig with motion simulation. This isn't the first on the market, but to see a mainstream brand like MSI getting into it should see prices start to drop. But by far the most impressive was the Gigagyte Aorus 720 Motion Simulator. Unlike MSI's product, which only has a small range of motion, the 720 can basically go fully vertical, sideways, and any other direction. The user has to be strapped in with the similar mounting

system seen on roller coasters, and it needs extremely thick mounts to stop the thing ripping your floor apart. At US$20k it's not cheap, but when combined with a Rift and HOTAS makes for the ultimate flight simulator; far more affordable than doing it for real.

PVME SSDS

We can't recall seeing a single SSD at the show that didn't support the NVMe format for M.2 and U.2 drives, which will lead to an exponential speed boost when it comes to storage performance. Every motherboard also had support for this, and many motherboards now boast up to three M.2 slots. M.2 cooling is also a big deal now, with most motherboards featuring a small heatsink for M.2 drives to stop the issue of thermal throttling. We even saw a product that allows users to mount four M.2 drives onto a single PCIe x16 card, and run them in RAID 0 mode. Speak of RAID, Intel showed of its Virtual Raid on CPU, which promises to make it simpler to set up RAID configurations in much more flexible configurations. It's an on-CPU technology, but you need to buy a special key to enable it.

RGB STILL HASN'T DIED

Ok, maybe we're getting old and cynical, but we're really not that impressed by cases that glow like a nuclear reactor. Yet it seems that every product now available on the market now comes with RGB lights. The major players like MSI and Gigabyte are trying to get all their gear to place nicely together, though there are some rivalries such as Corsair and Thermaltake where it seems very unlikely. This is why RGB lighting needs its own kind of standard for communicating to stop consumers ending up with products that don't work together – here's hoping.

GAMING CHAIRS ARE THE NEW HEADSET

A few years ago and it seemed that every peripheral maker and his proverbial dog was making headsets. Well, now they're making gaming chairs. According to one marketing person I spoke to, this is because gaming chairs are one of the products where there's still a healthy profit margin to be made. A few of them were actually decent, and most seem to sit around the $400 price point. However, after using a Herman Miller Aeron for six years, there's no going back for me.

802.11AD

Yup, there's another Wi-Fi standard on the way, and this time it's designed for Ultra high speeds at ultra-close range. It uses the 60GHz spectrum instead of 5GHz or 2.4GHz as seen in today's devices, and delivering a theoretical maximum of 7Gbps. There's also a new wave of high-speed Ethernet on the way, with both 5Gbit/sec and 10Gbit/sec showing up on motherboards, routers, and NAS devices.

So there you have it in a nutshell. The incredible hype around VR had definitely died off, though it was still present at most booths, just not promoted via huge signs and dozens of booth babes. The major news is the recommencement of the CPU wars, and that gaming chairs are apparently the hot new thing.

You can find all our Computex coverage in the PCPP Tech Special 2017, on sale now. PC

▲ (clockwise from top left) MSI X299 Gaming M7 ACK, Aorus X299 Gaming 9, ASRock Z270 Super Carrier, ASUS ROG Zenith Extreme

◀ Corsair waterproof K68 keyboard

> "it needs extremely thick mounts to stop the thing ripping your floor apart"

▼ (below, left to right) InWin Winbot, Thermaltake View 71 TG, Donkey Kong custom case, Toshiba NVMe SSD, Corsair gaming chair

HOTWARE 264

with Terrence Jarrad

01 SNES Mini

$119.95 ▪ Nintendo

www.nintendo.com.au

Like the NES mini before it, this console is a revision of its earlier incarnation, smaller, and with built-in games. It'll release on September 30.

POWERED UP: This time around it comes with two controllers, and 21 pre-installed games, including the never-before-released, Star Fox 2. Others in the lineup include Earthbound, Contra III, Donkey Kong Country, Mega Man X, and Super Metroid.

PLAYED OUT: As with the NES Mini, this does not come with an AC power adapter, so add another $19.95 to the total cost if you need one. And if the NES sales were any indication, this will sell out fast, if it hasn't already!

02 KOOV Blocks

$400 ▪ Indiegogo

bit.ly/2tot1t4

Robotics is a field that's gaining momentum right now – just look at Boston Dynamics' nightmare creations. So why not prepare your kids with the tools they'll need to overthrow their robot overlords, with this beginner robotics kit from Sony?

POWERED UP: Accelerometer, infrared and light sensors, switch, buzzer, LEDs and DC and servo motors, along with over 100 blocks and an app that features a visual drag and drop programming language, make this a fully featured educational tool disguised as a fun toy.

PLAYED OUT: Skynet on Indiegogo.

03 Dreem Headband

$700 ▪ Rythm

shop.dreem.com

A more restful sleep could be a headband away. That's what Rythm would have us believe, at least, as it launches its brain-reading device.

POWERED UP: A headband that reads your brainwaves to determine what state of sleep you're in, and then plays sound through bone conduction to help to trigger more restful deep sleep or assist you in waking up.

PLAYED OUT: Not available here yet, and while you could probably Shipito it, it might be nice to have some independent reviews of its efficacy before dropping this much cash.

04 Vue Smart Glasses

$280 ▪ Vue

www.enjoyvue.com

It is often claimed that wearing glasses makes one appear smart, and now the glasses themselves are smart as well.

POWERED UP: Prescription, plano, and sunglasses that track steps and calories, use bone conduction to play music and hands-free calls, and provide notification with subtle LED, all controllable through touch-based gestures like tapping and swiping. The water resistant frames weigh only 28 grams, and you'll get 2-3 days out of the battery, up to a week by using the special charging case.

PLAYED OUT: Frames are a little chunky due to all the tech bundled within.

05 Elbow Portable Tape Player

$Nope ▪ Not really

elbow.co.nf

Return to the days of musical glory – no, not vinyl, cassette tape! (Said no-one ever). While this design remains purely in the land of concept for now, enough interest could potentially see it realise production.

POWERED UP: Compact design, ability to play both forwards and backwards (to access side B)

PLAYED OUT: Given the limited playback of a tape and its all-round impracticality, this one, if it is ever actually made, is going to be purely a novelty item for hipsters looking to start a conversation.

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Steam Controller
$89.95 *store.steampowered.com*
There's a bit of a learning curve, but it's great for couch gaming

MODEM ROUTERS

For all rational budgets

BUDGET

TP-Link VR600
$179 *tp-link.com*
Not the fastest, but it's stable, well priced and feature packed. ADSL modem built in

Synology Router RT1900ac
$199 *synology.com*
No built-in ADSL modem, but it's fast and has the best interface around

PREMIUM

NETGEAR R8000 Nighthawk X6 Tri-Band WiFi Router
$300 *netgear.com.au*
Formerly our pick for the Beast, this router is more than powerful and fast enough for all your gaming needs

LAPTOPS

Gaming on the go

BUDGET

Gigabyte P55W v5
$2099 *gigabyte.com.au*
If you want real gaming performance in a laptop, $2k is where it starts

PREMIUM

Metabox Prime-X
$6899 *metabox.com.au*
The fastest laptop around costs big

MINI

For lounge room gaming and streaming

CPU + COOLING
Intel Core i5 7500 w/ stock cooler
$254
intel.com

MOBO
ASRock Z270M-ITX/AC Motherboard
$200
asrock.com.au

GPU
Asus DUAL-RX480-4G
$338
asus.com.au

MEMORY
16GB DDR4 Corsair Vengeance LPX Low Profile$185
corsair.com/en-au

STORAGE
Samsung SSD M.2 2280 NVMe 250G 960 EVO + 2TB HDD (any)
$178 + $50 *samsung.com/au*

CASE
Fractal Design Define S Nano
$115
fractal-design.com

PSU
SilverStone SFX Gold 500W SX500-LG
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Silverstone.com

SOUND
Your sound system
What you paid for it

DISPLAY
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www.roccat.org

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intel.com

MOBO
ASRock B250 Gaming K4 Motherboard
$150
asrock.com.au

GPU
Gigabyte RX480G1-GAMING-4GD
$279
gigabyte.com.au

MEMORY
G.Skill Ripjaws 4 DDR4 2400MHz 16GB Kit 2x 8GB
$135 *gskill.com*

STORAGE
2TB HDD (any)
$50 *www.staticice.com.au*

CASE
Corsair Carbide SPEC-02 Mid Tower Gaming Case
$70 *corsair.com/en-au*

PSU
SilverStone Strider Essential 500W ST50F-ESB $55
Silverstone.com

SOUND
Cougar Immersa
$59
cougargaming.com

DISPLAY
AOC e2450Swh
$158
aocmonitorap.com/anz

KEYBOARD
Tesoro Tizona G2N
$55
tesorotec.com

MOUSE
Rapoo V20 Optical Gaming Mouse
$35
rapoo.com

TOTAL: **$1300**

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msi.com

GPU
Galax GTX 1070 EXOC Sniper White 8Gb
$575
asus.com.au

MEMORY
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$289
gskill.com

STORAGE
2TB HDD (any) + SAMSUNG 500GB M.2 NVMe SSD 960 EVO
$375
samsung.com/au

CASE
Corsair Graphite 760T Full Tower Case Black
$220
corsair.com/en-au

PSU
Be Quiet! Dark Power Pro 11 850W Power Supply
$260
bequiet.com

SOUND
Sennheiser PC 373D
$329
en-au.sennheiser.com

DISPLAY
Acer Predator XB271HU
$979
acerstore.com.au

KEYBOARD
Logitech G413 Silver
$129
www.logitech.com/en-au

MOUSE
Corsair Glaive
$109
www.corsair.com

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coolermaster.com

MOBO
MSI X299 Carbon Pro Gaming AC
$569
msi.com

VIDEO
Aorus GeForce GTX 1080 Ti Xtreme Edition 11G
$1229
gigabyte.com.au

MEMORY
2 x 16GB Corsair Vengeance LPX DDR4 3000
$318
corsair.com/en-au

STORAGE
Samsung 960 Pro 2TB + Seagate Barracuda Pro 10TB
$1649 + $699
samsung.com/au

CASE
CoolerMaster Cosmos II 25th Anniversary Edition
$449
coolermaster.com

PSU
Corsair RM1000i Special Edition
$205
corsair.com/en-au

SOUND
Astro A50
$469
www.astrogaming.com

DISPLAY
Asus ROG Swift PG27AQ
$1349
asus.com.au

KEYBOARD
Corsair K95 Platinum RGB
$349
corsair.com/en-au/

MOUSE
Razer Deathadder Elite
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razerzone.com/au-en/

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MA/PCD264

Road to a Weird Kind of Immortality

During the gap between when our PCs became capable of running large-scale open-world games, and developers became capable of actually programming them, there was this. True fans called it Xenus, but Atari's marketing division called it Boiling Point: Road to Hell.

XENUS or BOILING POINT: ROAD TO HELL

DEVELOPER UKRAINIAN OUTFIT DEEP SHADOWS.
RELEASED 2005
NUTSHELL Wander an open world managing your reputation among no fewer than six factions, upgrade your skills, meet RPGs, lose hours of progress thanks to terrible bugs, and maybe become part of a small but loyal fanbase that has persisted for nearly 13 years...

Games released in the second decade of the 21st century are spoiled by technology. And it's not just that they run on incredibly powerful and increasingly standardised hardware. More than that, developers now have access to a huge pantry of renderers and physics engines, APIs and plugins.

But Xenus was built in 2005 by a bunch of dudes in Ukraine, and so it had its own engine - the Vital engine! That engine did its best, but alas, the job Deep Shadows expected it to do was… well, it was substantial.

Were the game being promoted today, we'd think oh yes, how very Far Cry: Edgily-bald protagonist Saul Myers receives an urgent call from his mutant-breasted daughter. Things are going bad in Columbia! Or, after Atari picked up the game, the fictional Columbia-like country of Realia! Fortunately Myers is a veteran of the French Foreign Legion, so he immediately gets himself to Realia where nobody cares that an ex-member of one of the world's most feared elite multinational fighting units has just walked through customs only several months after his journalist daughter.

Anyway, Myers makes his way to a 25km x 25km valley filled with tropical jungle, two major cities, and dozens of camps, outposts and "Indian" villages.

There, much as he would were he a Far Cry hero, he must pursue various leads and gain more and more map-control by doing odd jobs for the game's *six* factions (plus the CIA).

So: 25km x 25km map, fully open world, drivable vehicles, RPG mechanics, scripted missions and random events, dozens of NPCs with dialogue trees, persistent world state, and six factions. All this running on 2005 hardware, using 2005 software.

> "that it ran well should not be important: the real miracle was that the game ran at all"

Just to remind you: back in 2005 Nvidia had just released its 6-series cards. And I don't mean the GeForce 680, I mean the GeForce 6800, which had been engineered for AGP and only had PCIe prongs soldered to it at the last minute. It had 512MB of RAM, and supported DirectX 9.

Truly, it was the dark ages.

So Xenus was really a dancing bear: that it ran well should not be important: the real miracle was that the game ran at all.

Even so, when you pay $100 for an open-world game that lets you be a French Foreign Legion badass while championing male-pattern-baldness, it is reasonable to expect that when you trigger scripts, those scripts actually, you know, trigger.

On release, Xenus was the software equivalent of a giant ball of rubber bands into which has been embedded hundreds of mousetraps. Do you dare to poke?

A massive 2.0 patch addressed many of the most common problems, including such minor quirks as "landscape not rendering when flying plane" and "prisoners get stuck in walls when delivered". Grenades were updated to bounce off walls and explode rather than

stick (next to the prisoners), the money promised to the player when taking on a mission actually gets paid, boats no longer appear to be filled with water, and perhaps most importantly of all: *dogs finally get shadows.*

Charmingly, the translated-from-Ukrainian changelog refers to NPCs having improved "IA" - which presumably stands for *Intelligence Artificielle*, on account of how Myers is ex-Foreign Legion.

"Characters move when hooting [sic], adapt their behaviour according to the situation", "flowers in Granny's hands" and "too big Moon has been readjusted" are also patch notes for the ages.

Xenus is obviously a very easy game to make fun of, but I actually reviewed the thing for PCPP back in 2005, and while I saw the bugs - oh boy did I see the bugs - I also saw an incredibly exciting future for the kind of scope PC could let game developers achieve.

Sure, GTA San Andreas had come out on console in 2004 and hit PC in 2005, but that worked through fakery.

You can go anywhere in GTA (after you unlock the whole map, remember that?) but every actual activity is a matter of you triggering an event and then following the prompts.

Xenus kept the PC-like complexity we demanded from games like Morrowind, but added in lots of tasty FPS stuff. Weapons, weapon proficiencies, driving, flying, and of course the dynamic faction system.

That extra layer of complexity made it more X3 (also a 2005 release, also broken on launch) than Far Cry 2. Xenus was a game with stats and numbers, but also a world-simulator. It took the abstraction of a RPG and boiled it down to a believable setting. It had the potential to make you realise what "Strength: 13" really means.

Unfortunately, something went wrong in the boiling process. It's all too easy to blame the technology, but at least a few fingers should be pointed at Atari. It's a boring accusation, but a true one: the publisher jumped the gun and forced Xenus onto the world with nothing more than a tenuous marketing link to The Mummy star Arnold Vosloo (Myer's model is based on him), and a name change, to *Boiling Point: Road to Hell.*

While the first wave of reviews excoriated Deep Shadows' life's work, the developer ignored the building social unrest in Ukraine and diligently provided the afore mentioned 2.0 patch. Reviews from after the patch were much more positive, excited even.

It wasn't enough to keep Atari interested in Deep Shadows. The relationship ended. Even so, the developer kept on working and released Xenus 2 within the Commonwealth of Independent States.

An English version was digitally-distributed for a while, but it had to be tough, working in a territory that was, you know, collapsing into war.

And yet, even today, there are still fans of both games. So in the middle of all the coups and publisher betrayals, Deep Shadows must have managed to do something right… *ANTHONY FORDHAM* PC

PRECURSOR TO A COMEBACK?

There's one other Deep Shadows game like Xenus, It's called Precursors, and it's a sci-fi version of the same FPS/RPG open world genre-mash. You can get it on Steam for six bucks. It has the most bizarre reviews… some praise it, but even those who point out that its cutscenes are in Russian with no subtitles, and it can only be quit using the Task Manager, still go to great pains to tell everyone how amazing and unique it is. The best Steam review quote? "Even though it's very unstable, broken, unbalanced and so rough around the edges, it makes those edges practically invisible… it's a one-of-a-kind experience that should not be missed."

Beyond Good Manners

DANIEL WILKS has a heart of stone

E3 2017 has come and gone. Although the event seemed much more subdued than those of the past (I haven't been in a few years because of clashing deadlines and the fact that I'm old, grumpy and take roughly forever to get over jetlag), there were still a number of announcements and reveals that drew my attention and made me genuinely excited. One of those announcements or reveals that didn't excite me was the one that seems to have garnered the most press – Beyond Good and Evil 2. Don't get me wrong – I absolutely loved Beyond Good and Evil and replayed it again recently, and would love to see a sequel, but the trailer, the "gameplay footage", and the breathless response to them are an example of everything I think is wrong about not just E3 as an event but the way supposedly professional journalists react to industry announcements at said event.

I'm something of a stick in the mud when it comes to hype and industry interaction. I do my best to avoid any events that blur the line between professional and personal relationships and I make it a point of pride never to mince words when it comes to my opinion, as I think that skirting around an issue in order to salve potentially hurt feelings ultimately serves to do nothing but muddy waters and cloud more important issues. I'll be polite – politeness never hurt anyone – but you can be politely direct rather than circumspect. I will always be honest about my opinion and feelings, but one thing I will never do is cheer, scream and carry on about a product, let alone a trailer.

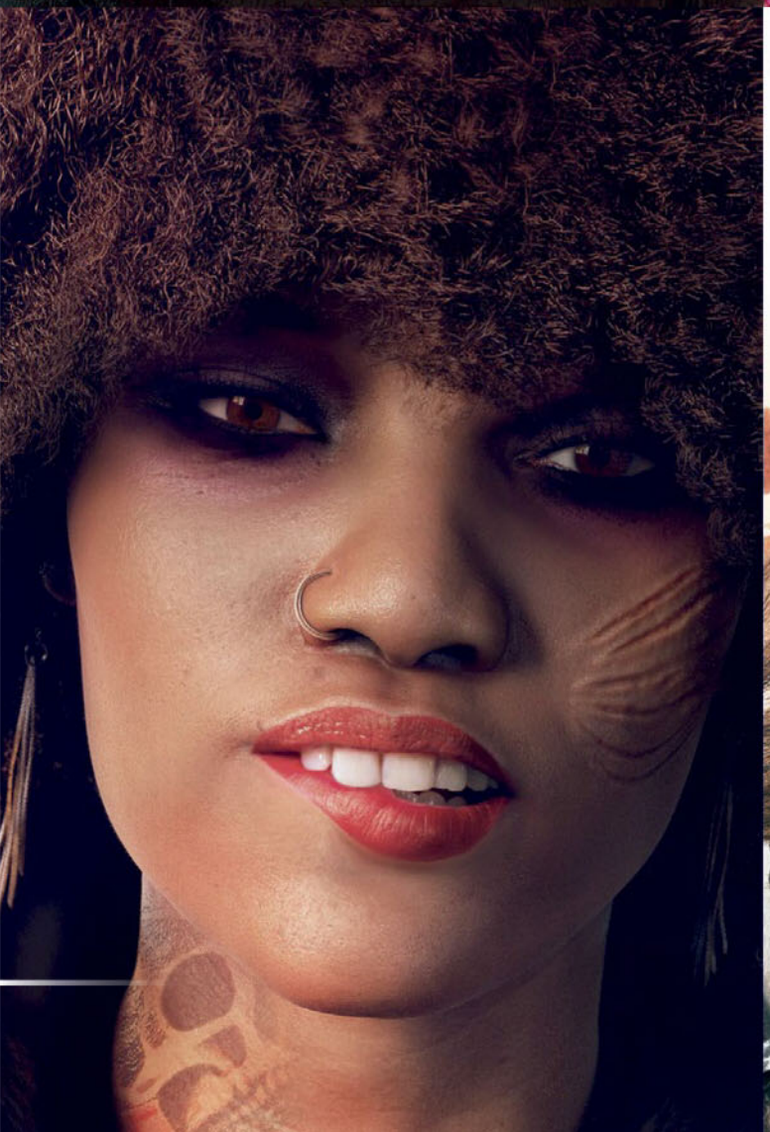
> "the Beyond Good & Evil 2 trailer looked great, sure, but so did the last trailer at Ubidays in 2008"

Take the Beyond Good and Evil 2 trailer as an example of this problem. The trailer was met with screams and roars of approval, applause and near orgasmic joy. It looked great, sure, but so did the last trailer, debuted at Ubidays in 2008. That trailer showed the protagonists of the original game and lacked any real context. Now, nine years later, a new trailer shows brand new characters in a context quite divorced from the original game. The trailer really says nothing. It's a spectacle and admittedly looks fantastic, but ultimately it's little more than a highly choreographed chase scene free of any real meaning. Who are the characters? Are they just thieves or is there a deeper purpose to them ripping off a crime boss?

After the trailer aired and the wooing died down, game director Michel Ancel stated that they had been working on the tech of the game for three years and later clarified that they were basically at day zero when it comes to actual game development, and announced that people could contribute to development through the Space Monkey Program. Does that mean that the trailer is a spec made action setpiece with no relation to the actual story or gameplay? Could be. There is no release window for the game, so the trailer was essentially an empty announcement for something that may be coming sometime in the future, and given that there has already been a trailer for the game featuring different characters (as well as leaked gameplay footage), the trailer could be totally divorced from the actual game. We don't know either way and that's the rub. The press should save its applause for something palpable, not for a promise.

This, at least to me, is the problem with events like E3 and how the press interacts with it. Flash and glitter can't outweigh substance, and when the press cheers and whoops for joy at a trailer, then those that are meant to hold developers to account and be arbiters of news and opinion stop being the press and become another arm of PR and marketing. We can be excited for a game, but our job is to be, if not impartial, at least rational. PC

▼ **A space monkey tries to count the years BG&E2 has been in development.**



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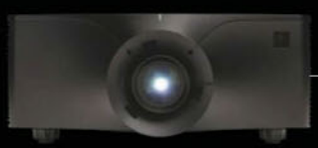

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INGRAM MICRO
tel: 1300 651 124
sales@ingrammicro.com.au

CHRISTIE AUSTRALIA
ph: +61 (0) 7 3624 4888
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